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More than pink shirts and posters: beyond the limits of anti-homophobia education

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**More than Pink Shirts and Posters:
Beyond the Limits of Anti-Homophobia Education**

by
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Abstract

Most schools in Canada are unsafe spaces for queer youth or those perceived by their peers as queer. Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other LGBTQ+ inclusive groups exist in schools with the goal of mitigating and working against homophobia and transphobia. Homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and transphobia are consistent forms of oppression in K-12 schooling in Ontario. Typically, it is straight teachers who lead GSA-type groups and are committed to LGBTQ+ equity work in their schools despite often being under-supported by their colleagues, supervisors, and school board policy. In addition to the other demands of their profession, teachers who take on allyship in their already busy professional lives should be recognized for their efforts and hard work. However, most allies fall short of acknowledging or mitigating against their own straight privilege. Given the role straight teachers play in GSAs, this research analyzes the role and experiences of straight teacher ally activists working with LGBTQ+ students. Guided by the research question: *How can straight teacher ally activists move beyond the limits of anti-homophobia education by challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools?*, I suggest that the overall effectiveness resisting normalized heterosexuality through anti-homophobia efforts is limited. Teacher allies should work toward queering school spaces by examining their own straight privilege as a starting point. This research stands as a call to action for policy makers, school board administrators, and leadership to provide mandatory training for all staff that zeros-in on straight privilege and heteronormativity as a way to resist its dominance. Following a manuscript-style, the research findings are reported in three manuscripts written and formatted for submission to scholarly journals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The vast majority of schools in Canada are dominated by unsafe spaces/experiences for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer/Questioning+ (LGBTQ+¹) youth (Taylor et al., 2011) who continue to experience higher rates of suicide, depression, isolation, harassment/bullying, and self-harm compared to their straight peers (Grace, 2015; O'Connor, 1995; Pascoe, 2007; Walton, 2005). Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) exist in schools with the goal of mitigating and working against homophobia. Often, straight teachers lead these groups (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2016; Russell, 2011). Because of the role straight teachers play in GSAs and other anti-homophobia initiatives in schools, there is a practical need to analyze the role and experiences of straight teacher ally activists working with LGBTQ+ students and the overall effectiveness of anti-homophobia efforts under their purview.

Research Purpose

The primary purpose of my research is to explore the activities of straight teacher allies of LGBTQ+ students and the work they do to develop cultures in schools that not only mitigate homophobia, but that also challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism. Challenging heterosexism and heteronormativity represents a critical step in addressing the marginalization of LGBTQ+ students in schools. I focus on how (and if) straight teachers move beyond the limitations of anti-homophobia education into ally stances that challenge systemic oppression. The research aims to join the

¹ I use LGBTQ+ as the primary acronym throughout this document. In some cases, I will use LGB where sexuality, not gender identity, is specifically being discussed. It is conventional to include all these identities together under one umbrella term despite their distinctions and differences. As do other scholars and activists (Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2015) I also use the short form of transgender, trans. It is inclusive of transgender and transsexual and, although it is frequently used with an asterisk at the end (trans*) I opt not to use trans*. In other words, both trans and trans* are considered inclusive, respectful, and useful. For more information: <http://www.transstudent.org/asterisk>

conversation of queer theorists who resist normalized hierarchies under patriarchy because of the injustice wrought by gender-based oppression (see Britzman, 1995; Foucault, 1978; Kumashiro, 2000; 2004; Pinar, 2007; Rasmussen et al., 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Warner, 1993). My work is guided by one primary research question: *How can straight teacher² ally activists move beyond the limits of anti-homophobia education by challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools?*

The purpose of anti-homophobia education is to resist oppression. Unlike queering education, anti-homophobia education does not necessarily re-envision the way school spaces exist and function. I explore the ways that straight teacher allies experience privilege as they engage in activism work with LGBTQ+ students and colleagues in schools. My research contributes to literature on straight allies and activism and seeks out understandings of allyship that highlight a respectful positioning of privilege in social movements. Contributing in this way is needed because, in school-based contexts, many teacher leaders of GSAs and other pride organizations are straight (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2014). The role of straight teachers, despite their prevalence in GSA leadership, is under-researched—and this is true of Canada in general and Ontario in particular (Eichler, 2010; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2014; Russell, 2011). The majority of straight student allies in Goldstein and Davis' (2010) study of an American college campus were “white, female, politically-liberal, and religiously inactive, social sciences and humanities majors” (p. 488). The homogeneity of this group, according to the authors, sits in contrast to otherwise diverse student bodies, further reinforcing the importance of understanding the role that privilege plays in the lives of allies of LGBTQ+ people.

² Throughout this document, I treat the terms “teacher” and “educator” as synonyms. Participants in my study could be, but are not limited to being, classroom teachers. They may be administrators, teachers, and/or student support personnel (SSPs).

Personal Connection and Grounding

Most of my adult life and teaching career have been guided by activist sensibilities that are rooted in a desire for greater equity for marginalized groups in society. A common paradox for privileged people like me (white, straight, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied, well-educated) lies in the fact that although I feel it is my social responsibility to work toward such equity, I come to that disposition with the luxury of choice. My experiences of privilege mean that I have the luxury to “opt in” to certain struggles for liberation rather than to experience life from a marginalized or oppressed position. I have worked with students and colleagues as part of GSAs in schools, marched with my union in Toronto’s Pride Parade, and, more informally, supported LGBTQ+ colleagues, friends, and students in schools. My doctoral research affords me the opportunity to explore the experiences of other straight teacher allies alongside my own and to see how they work against oppressive mechanisms in schools. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to contribute to a conversation about the radical politicization of straight teachers doing activism work in schools. What I mean by “radical” in this context is a movement toward recognizing the political nature of anti-homophobia and queer activism in schools instead of sanitizing them as generic, anti-bullying activities.

I began my doctoral studies confident in the knowledge that I had ended up in exactly the right place at precisely the right time. I was coming home to myself, and fulfilling my innate desire to ask questions and get lost in seeking answers. I am grateful to have had this time to enthusiastically study, write, and reflect, and also to have contributed to scholarly conversations. I have felt this gratitude and self-assurance from the beginning. What I did not know at the outset was that one of the most transformative experiences of the program would occur during my first doctoral seminar.

The great Twitter debacle of 2013. Three-quarters of the way through my first doctoral seminar, I found myself, figuratively speaking, in some hot water. Over the weekend, I had tweeted something that I had intended to be funny. While indeed it was funny, in context and amongst friends, out of context, the tweet could only be interpreted as homophobic.

I was floored by the backlash. After all, I was an ally. How could my tweet present me as the opposite?

I see now that it was tweeted not from a position of confidence, but from a place of arrogance, and the event will forever be stamped in my mind as *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*. The details are as follows: While spending time with some queer friends, I tweeted a portion of our discussion of favourite childhood movies. My friend's gay male roommate said his two favourite movies were *Mean Girls* and *The Notebook*. The whole group, confessor included, burst out laughing. I tweeted: “‘Mean Girls and The Notebook are my favourite movies.’ That’s the gayest thing I’ve heard today.” Unbeknownst to my friends and I, classmates in my program read the tweet and were shocked and upset by its content. One responded, not by tweeting a response or by contacting me directly, but by informing my supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton, without initially identifying me as the offender. The student eventually told him that I was the tweeter. I received an email from Gerald a day later, highlighting my transgression and my classmates’ concern. He urged me to apologize, in a sincere and responsible way that did not gloss over my transgression and citing other well-known public figures, like Jason Alexander and, more recently, Jonah Hill, who made similar errors in judgment.

I did.

I issued a 6-tweet apology (sometimes 140 characters is not enough). To say that I was distraught is an understatement. My entire identity as a compassionate educator, activist, and ally was shaken. After a couple of days, when I thought things had died down a bit, a student from one of the other

cohorts approached me to explain the effect of my tweet. She identified that students in her cohort had been discussing it in class and, while I had not been mentioned by name, the identity of the tweeter seemed to be well-known. I was horrified. I managed to remain composed during the conversation but, immediately following, I burst into (more) tears. *Didn't people read the apology tweet? Did people really think I was a homophobe? Didn't they know the kind of work I did?*

With permission from the course instructors, I decided that I would publicly apologize to the entire group during our joint class session the next day. I made a heartfelt public apology to the group, hoping that I had done my best to articulate just how much I had misrepresented my own ethics, values, and beliefs. A few classmates were openly supportive and receptive of my apology; most were silent, but receptive. To date, that apology (along with the entire experience) is the most challenging thing I have undertaken and accomplished in my doctoral program. I do not know the outcome of this experience for my classmates beyond immediate responses from some people I had already formed the bonds of friendship with. I can imagine though, that my response to *the Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* was impactful beyond me and my own self-reflections and scholarship. As such, I take every opportunity I can to share the story of *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* as an opportunity for others to learn and reflect on my initial offence and my response (Potvin, 2016).

A new plan. My difficult and formative experience on Twitter clarified for me that my self-positioning required greater analysis. I needed to better understand that being a straight ally came with considerable social privilege. Although I had entered the doctoral program planning to continue my research on masculinity (Potvin, 2011), I realized very early in the program that I was not fully engaged with the topic. My experience on Twitter had caused me to consider my ally identity more cerebrally and, by extension, to analyze more exhaustively the nature of allyship in general. My brain and curiosity were pulling me into straight ally research, and I

decided to follow. My ego was wounded, my confidence as an ally was ruptured, and my commitment to equity and activism was disrupted. I needed to dig into the ally experience, to understand my own actions.

I began to research the nature of allyship and whether or not allies could, in fact, be a benefit to social movements in respectful ways. I dug deeper into writings on allies and queer theory. I started making connections between the things I knew about decolonizing education (and its focus on white/settler privilege) and the ways in which queer theory and feminist critiques challenged patriarchy and normalized heterosexism. Understanding and challenging privilege were, it seemed to me, at the heart of decolonizing education, queer theory, and feminist theory and soon formed the basis of my research and writing.

I have written and re-written the narrative of *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* many times. Each time I read, write, and re-write it, I recall how I felt and what I have learned from it so far, and I contemplate how my life and perspective would have been different without this experience. While the Twitter incident is pivotal to the way I try to position myself now, it is only part of the story. As I review the re-telling of my fuller story as an ally and its role in this research, I feel particular discomfort reading the parts of the story where I seem to be proving my worth and value as an ally. I am left feeling uncomfortable with my own need and desire to present myself as a benevolent ally. Oddly enough, then, my good stories—those in which I put forward my ally credentials—do not sit well with me. Perhaps my discomfort is rooted in my self-perceived need to receive credit and/or accolades for my ally work.

The reality of telling and re-telling my story as an ally has led me to realize there is as much—or more—power in my bad stories as in my good ones. Consequently, I now make a concerted effort to move away from telling self-congratulatory tales, instead emphasizing my worst story, my *Twitter Debacle*, in academic and non-academic settings. My good stories have their place, but the bad stories

recount experiences that have a depth and richness that help establish a more robust picture of allyship. I employ the terms “good” and “bad” here cognizant of the fact that both are loaded and complicated words. I purposively use them to toy with normative definitions—to reconsider who defines the value of a story. Deliberately using them raises the critical question, for whom are certain stories “good” and/or “bad”? Using the terms “good” and “bad” represent may seem overly-simplistic to some, reinforcing a dichotomy that should be deconstructed. I use the terms intentionally to challenge common understandings of the terms and conventional associations. For example, *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* initially felt (and sometimes still feels) like a story that I would rather not tell. I still feel shame, embarrassment, and discomfort from my transgression. However, in the re-telling of the story, I am able to reflect on all the ways that “bad” story has positively impacted me as a person and educator. I choose the word “bad,” not to reinforce or reduce these experiences, but to problematize the conception that a story or experience is imbued with one innate quality (or set of qualities) over another. Allies (and people of privilege) are often eager to share stories that portray them as benevolent and successful in their social justice activities; so-called good stories. At the same time, they are reticent to share stories that might expose ignorance about their unacknowledged privilege; so-called bad stories. The bad stories—the stories that people like me may not be proud or feel uncomfortable telling—at the heart of them are rich moments of learning and growth. They serve a positive pedagogical outcome for teachers and learners. I persist in using the term “bad,” instead of something like an “unsettling story” or a “disruptive story,” to push a prod at the way that the word bad is understood: as undesirable, something to avoid, something of which to be ashamed. Articulating bad stories highlights how privilege can covertly operate in schools—even through its well-intentioned staff and students.

Prior to the experience of *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*, I viewed allyship in a more self-centered way—unchanging and benevolent. The experience shook my foundation and caused me to

reconsider my positioning as an ally. It compelled me to explore the ally experience more exhaustively. In addition to the important ways in which it humbled me, it drove me to realize that other allies must also have complex experiences as allies in relationship to their own privilege. This dissertation is the outcome of what I have learned as a result of this relationship.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This research is guided by queer theory (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 2004; Foucault, 1978), and decolonization theory (Battiste, 2005, 2013; Driskill, Finley, Gilley, & Morgensen, 2011; Finley, 2011). What follows is an elaboration on how these academic traditions are fundamental to the theoretical framework that guides my doctoral research.

A foundational theoretical framework of this research is queer theory, a field that can be tricky to understand because it often eludes concrete definition. Indeed, queer theory is often defined by what it is not rather than by what it is. Outside of a queer critique, queerness is often seen as abnormal, different, other. Consequently, within queer theory, queerness becomes the subject of study, the focus, and the new normal. Put differently, queer theory seeks to dismantle the normalcy box and to envision a reality where multiple ways of knowing and being exist. As a theoretical framework, it is rooted in the resistance of social norms. Foucault's work (1978, 1986) forms the basis of queer theory's core in his own work and also through his cited influence on post-structuralist feminist thinkers like Butler (1990/2011; 2004) and Sedgwick (1985;1993). For Butler (1990/2011) gender and sexuality are socially constructed and fluid parts of a person's identity. Gender and sexuality, through a poststructuralist lens, resist being essentialized, which is to be made static and unchanging. At first glance, gender or sexuality may not seem like a fluid part of oneself not because of the innate qualities of gender or sexuality themselves, but because of the ways they are regulated in society. Schools are one site of regulation. For example, many schools in Ontario are currently in the process of adapting their washrooms to provide

safer facilities for trans students with gender-neutral washrooms³. The challenge for trans students lay in the perception of their gender by other people. The highly regulatory nature of schools can result in harassment and discrimination toward trans students seeking alternatives because of the lack of understanding and supports in place. In addition to these structural impositions, individuals and groups in schools and classrooms impose norms and values about gender and sexuality by challenging gender non-conforming students' appearance and not using their preferred pronouns and/or name.

Queer theory frames my research because, I argue, it has pedagogical value whose utility can be explored through the experiences of straight allies. Sedgwick (1993) understands the notion of queerness, at the heart of queer theory, as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (p. 8). In other words, gender and sexuality are multilayered, diverse, and constantly changing entities. Like queer theory, schools are complex, multilayered, and diverse spaces. Too often, however, they do not function that way. Instead, schools are highly-regulated environments where identity, behaviour, and codes of conduct are rigidly constructed and regulated, which limits possibilities for diversity that pedagogy guided by queer theory could offer. The potential that queer theory provides to re-envision schools as spaces where more fluid gender and sexual identities are fostered is vast and allies could play an important role in creating the conditions for change given proper training and institutional support.

The central point is that queer theory and queer pedagogy aim to disrupt the boundary between excluded and included. In doing so, these areas are “explicitly transgressive, perverse, and political” (Britzman, 1995, p. 157). They formulate new ways of knowing and working beyond the

³ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/transgender-school-policies-bathrooms-student-voices-1.3589717>

inclusion/exclusion binary. Britzman (1995), Linville (2009), Pinar (1998, 2007), and Rodriguez (2007) identify the ways in which queer pedagogy has the potential to disrupt normative discourse in schools and classrooms. However, queer theory is not the sum-total of the theoretical framework that scaffolds my work. Theories of decolonization also help inform my research. Queer theory and Indigenous/decolonizing theory, to which I now turn, find commonality in their resistance to Eurocentrism. Battiste (2005) reminds educators and scholars that the “exclusionary culture and curricula that have long permeated Eurocentric educational institutions” devalue and decimate Indigenous knowledge within schools (p. 128). Exclusionary culture within colonization also applies to sexual and gender marginalized groups (Barker, 2017; Driskill et al., 2011; Finley, 2011). Similar to the way that schools validate and normalize the experiences of straight people, educational institutions also reflect the norms and values of white/settlers to the detriment of Indigenous people. The experiences of straight teachers in relation to heterosexism and heteronormativity are similar to those of white educators’ anti-racist, decolonization work within schooling contexts. Driskill et al. (2011) work toward establishing common goals for queer theory and Indigenous studies in what they call an “invitation into multiplicity and complexity” (p. 18). Smith (2011) states the queer theory is a way out of the “ethnographic entrapment” of Indigenous studies (p. 46).

Battiste (2013) conceptualizes and elaborates upon a pedagogical framework for decolonizing education. She also explores the implications of a decolonized education system. The process of decolonizing, she argues, is aimed at all peoples and systems; it is a procedure that should include “systemic change and trans-systemic reconciliations” (p. 14). Battiste problematizes the notion of so-called mainstream education, posing the question, “who does the ‘main’ belong to, and who is privileged, and who is streamed? ... how do we know the ‘other,’ and what methodology do we employ to talk with and about the ‘other’?” (2005, p. 104). Decolonizing education, thus, has implications for all

aspects of educational life and all individuals within an educational setting. Compatible with queer critiques of heteronormativity and heterosexism within school systems, theories of decolonization provide a framework for understanding and challenging the pervasive nature of dominant culture (Driskill et al., 2011; Finley, 2011).

One way to move beyond educators' resistance against homophobia amongst students and staff in schools and towards an affirmation of the lives of LGBTQ+ youth is to learn from Indigenous scholarship, which is also rooted in confronting inequality. Indigenous/decolonization scholarship focuses on the systemic marginalization of Indigenous people under colonialism. Like feminist and queer theory arguments about the pervasive nature of patriarchy, decolonization of education emphasizes the all-encompassing effect of colonialism on Indigenous and settler people alike (Battiste, 2005). My research leverages queer theory through straight allies in order to put queer theory into practice in schools. Queer theorists have long considered queer theory's role in schools, and yet, such a role is yet unfulfilled, lacking a major foothold in daily life in K-12 schools (Goldstein, Russell & Daley, 2007; Grace, 2015; Pinar, 1998). My research, then, seeks to connect the multiple layers and possibilities of queer theory with classrooms and the lived experiences of students and teachers in schools.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters, including this first, introductory chapter. The second chapter is a review of relevant literature where I explore queer theory, Indigenous scholar/decolonization theory, and the salience of heteronormativity, homophobia, and heterosexism in schools. In the third chapter, I present the methodological approach to this research: narrative inquiry. Additionally, I highlight the research process including methods of data collection, coding, and analysis. Chapter 4, the first of three manuscripts prepared for publication, explores the role of straight privilege for allies, including their "bad" stories of allyship, and the ways that relationships with colleagues and

fears related to job insecurity impact them as allies. Chapter 5 highlights the nature of allyship and pedagogical approaches in schools and classrooms in Ontario. The third manuscript, Chapter 6 aims attention at the ways in which allyship as a concept and role can be transformed to focus not only on oppression, but on privilege. The concluding chapter offers final reflections and next steps.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This review of relevant scholarship provides a context for researching the experiences of straight teacher allies as they engage in LGBTQ+ activism in schools. I bring together queer theory and decolonization theory emerging from Indigenous scholarship as a way to better understand the experiences of straight teacher allies and their work. These ally experiences, I argue, involve challenging straight privilege and working against heteronormative and heterosexist assumptions and practices in schools.

I begin with a discussion of cogent terms and concepts in my research. I then explore foundational concepts in the scholarship of both queer theory and theories of decolonization. I expand upon the ways that homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity regulate straightness in society, more broadly, and then in school contexts, more specifically. Also, I discuss and problematize ally identities within queer movements, including a critique of the so-called queer straight and suggest that critical, radical heterosexuality is a more viable and respectful positioning for straight allies.

Relevant Terms and Concepts

Ally, privilege, and heteronormativity are the primary concepts upon which both this review and this doctoral research hinge. Straight teachers can be important allies to LGBTQ+ students. According to Bishop (2002), allies are “people who recognize the unearned privilege they receive from society’s patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns” (p. 1). While Bishop’s definition presents an ideal of allyship, I argue throughout this research that acknowledging privilege is one of the most challenging tasks for allies. Bishop (2002) emphasizes the importance of allies exercising their power in ways that support social movements rather than re-inscribing oppression. Privilege is a form of dominance afforded to a group over others that perpetuates inequities (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). For this research, it means exploring straight privilege in the context of queer theory.

The dual actions of recognizing and taking responsibility suggest that straight allies are afforded privilege in society—at the expense of LGBTQ+ people—on account of their being heterosexual.

Straight privilege is the assumption or set of assumptions that the experiences of heterosexual people are the norm (Callaghan, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Nicholls, 2013; Rich 1980). Because it is so ingrained in our cultural expressions, straight privilege manifests itself in commonplace ways that can be challenging for straight people to see and acknowledge. As examples: most straight people can hold hands with their partner in public without fear of provoking a response from others; we can put a picture of our opposite sex partner in our office; and we can rest assured that most media will validate our life experiences. These experiences are so commonplace that straight people often fail to recognize them as privileged, and yet it is crucial for individuals to learn to recognize this privilege in order to make space for multiple ways of being and experiencing the world. One way that some straight teachers can acknowledge their privilege is through LGBTQ+ ally and activism work. In school contexts, for instance, some straight teachers are active supporters of GSAs (Russell, 2011). These forms of advocacy serve to interrupt overarching sociological forces, namely heteronormativity and heterosexism, at work in schools, like other institutions in society. Heteronormativity refers to the normalization of heterosexual privilege (Driskill et al., 2011) evident in school dances and Health and Physical Education curriculum. For example, it is the presumed norm, not the exception, that students will attend prom, graduation, and other events in straight couple pairings. In Health and Physical Education classes, students are divided into male and female groups and are often provided sex education that presumes cisgender straightness. Heterosexism presumes the superiority and naturalness of heterosexuality (Finley, 2011; Walton, 2006). Many of the key concepts relevant to my research (including aspects of queer theory and decolonization education) require a foundational knowledge of allyship, privilege, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia.

Another foundational concept in this research is the notion of intersectional feminism or intersectionality. As a theoretical concept, it emerged from the frustrations of women of colour with racism amongst primarily white feminist circles and the sexism within male-dominated critical race discourse. The experiences of women of colour had not been adequately represented by either mainstream feminist interests or critical race theory. Crenshaw (1991) specifically explores the intersection of racism and sexism that women of colour experience. More recently, McCall (2005) shows how intersectionality highlights the uniqueness of social life and the multiplicity of ways that a person can experience privilege and conversely oppression. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2015) highlight the complex ways that intersectionality has affected feminist thought and other critical theories, especially as individuals and groups have come to better understand relations of power. Intersectionality is an important component of this research for both LGBTQ+ youth and their straight allies. At the heart of intersectionality is a critique of privilege and the interconnectedness of the lived experience of privilege and/or oppression.

Kumashiro (2000) elucidates an understanding of what he calls self-reflection, in the context of anti-oppressive education and pedagogy. I rely upon Kumashiro's definition here, where self-reflection constitutes an individual considering oneself and one's privilege in the "dynamics of oppression". Self-reflexivity, on the other hand, is an extension of self-reflection where a person brings the knowledge of the self/other in the context of oppression into one's own sense of self (Kumashiro, 2000). Self-reflection in an anti-oppressive educational context may guide an individual to consider their role in oppression, whereas self-reflexivity shapes a person's sense of self based on the lessons learned from self-reflection. I employ these concepts (self-reflection and self-reflexivity) throughout my dissertation in the context of anti-oppressive education and pedagogy, both of which may be applied in the context of educators who examine their straight privilege.

Foundations of Queer Theory

In this section, I explore some of the key ideas in queer theory and their implications for pedagogy and practice. Queer theory is vital to resistance against homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity in schools. Resistance is at the heart of queer theory even in its early emergence in schools of thought like sociology.

Queering sociology. Early sociological scholars, according to Seidman (1994), were silent on the topic of sexuality. This silence leads to a normalization of heterosexuality in the discipline. Foundational thinkers in sociology, according to Seidman (1994), “never examined the social formation of modern regimes on bodies and sexualities” (p. 167) as these sites were considered private (not public) and therefore, not subject to social forces. Sociologists entered into discussions of sex and sexuality by way of so-called deviant behaviour: prostitution, pornography, and homosexuality. Many sociologists studied homosexuality before heterosexuality, therefore “a sociology of homosexuality emerged as part of the sociology of sex” (p. 169). The Kinsey Project on sex and sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s moved sex and sexuality studies away from an exclusive focus on deviance. Instead, Kinsey started to shape an understanding of sexuality as a continuum of behaviours and preferences (Seidman, 1994). It is from this theoretical point that the feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1970s “fashioned elaborate social concepts of homosexuality” (p. 169). Radical lesbian feminists (see Dworkin, 1989; Rich, 1980) sought to normalize same-sex relationships (and attraction) and critique institutions like marriage, child-rearing, and a traditional gender division of labour normalized by heterosexuality. Around this time, Foucault entered the academic conversation about sex, sexuality and their regulation.

Foucauldian foundations. Foucault (1978) discusses relations of power, sex, homosexuality, and public interest/discourse. He emphasizes that relations of power (the way that power exists and is exercised in relation to others) are central to sex/sexuality. Foucault maintains that public discourse,

although often covert, deploys its power to regulate people's sexual (private) lives and identities. Further, such discourse shapes notions of private and public sexualities in the first place. Foucault uses the example of the public vilification of homosexuality, and other "deviations" from the norms of so-called acceptable sexuality, as evidence of the ways in which public institutions (specifically, the State and the Church) exercise power in regulating private lives (sex/sexuality). As attitudes towards homosexuality relaxed, "homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged" (p. 101). Foucault outlines the ways in which power and public interest have regulated private lives.

In a later work, Foucault (1986) discusses his conception of heterotopic space in a lecture (published by Miskowiec) titled *Of Other Spaces*. Heterotopias, he says, are "real sites that can be found within the culture and are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (p. 3). Following his line of thinking, heterotopias can be thought of as places that exist in reality where individuals live their lives and are governed by power relations. Human groups both exist as and create heterotopias. Foucault argues that some heterotopias are not freely accessible, as entry is either compulsory (as is the case with prisons) or it requires people to know the codes/rites (as is the case with schools). Notably, heterotopic spaces such as schools are often semi-self-governing and highly regulated public arenas. Rasmussen (2004) relies on Foucault's notion of heterotopias to launch a critique of so-called "safe spaces" in schools, an argument that I will explore at greater length later in this literature review. In short, Rasmussen emphasizes the way relations of power play out in school spaces, guided by Foucault's (1986) conception of heterotopias.

Halperin's (1997) research builds on Foucault's theoretical contributions to queer theory and provides a framework for disrupting normative ways of being, knowing, and thinking. While queer theorists assign great influence to Foucault's work, Foucault himself did not identify as a queer theorist.

In fact, as a theoretical framework, queer theory was largely formulated and conceptualized after his death. Homophobia, according to Halperin, is a systemic strategy, broad in scope, that aims to oppress queer people and those perceived as queer. It is not constituted as one simple act or even a series of acts that can be resisted with an oppositional act or set of acts. As such, it must be resisted strategically, and not simply be refuted in the ways that anti-homophobia efforts often attempt. Queer theory, therefore, provides a platform from which to comprehensively resist homophobia. Strategic resistance of homophobia, guided by queer theory, is more effective than ad hoc anti-homophobia efforts because it requires a move away from heteronormativity. The goal of queer theory is to shift from a paradigm where heterosexuality is imbued with subjectivity, often assumed or deemed as innate or natural, whereas homosexuality occupies an objectified space. Sexualities themselves, Foucault (1978) had argued two decades earlier, are a by-product of the scientific method and the discourse surrounding it. Under such a set of heteronormative assumptions, homosexuality is never fully conceived of or assigned the agency and complexity that heterosexuality is afforded. Homophobia would see its end, Halperin argues, if this traditional binary of subject (heterosexual) and object (homosexual) could be replaced with “queer theory”—an umbrella term for a broader, systemic queer ideology that actively dismantles homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity.

Queer theory versus LGBT studies? Berlant and Warner (1995) debunk two prevailing notions about queer theory; first, they challenge the presumption that it is monolithic, and second, they maintain that it does not comprise a set of easily compartmentalized theories. They articulate their interest in eschewing conventional definitions that “define, purify, sanitize, or otherwise entail the emerging queer commentary,” instead aiming “to prevent the reduction of queer theory to a specialty or metatheory” (p. 344). The authors shed light on queer theory’s multiplicities—on its many faces. In particular, they suggest the pursuit of queer publics. These spaces or publics are not exclusively for individuals who

identify as queer, but are rather for those who seek an alternative to the normalized gender/sexual narrative under patriarchy. Seeking membership and belonging in queer publics is “more a matter of aspiration than it is the expression of an identity or a history” (p. 344).

Presenting a contrasting focus to Berlant and Warner (1995), Lovaas, Elia, and Yep (2007) consider the differences between LGBT theory and queer theory. They argue that LGBT theory emerged as a set of ideas based upon sexual minorities seeking acceptance in mainstream society, whereas queer theory comes from a critical, postmodern discipline that emphasizes and prioritizes the importance and value of social differences. In this way, queer theory stresses multiple ways of knowing, experiencing, and understanding the world. While LGBT theorists might strive for respectability in the eyes of the straight majority by highlighting sameness, queer theory does not present a unified identity politic, instead committing itself to resisting norms that regulate everyday life. Hébert (2014) critiques the limitation of LGBT studies wherein “LG(BT) mainstream politics [that] tend to center on gays’ and lesbians’ respectability and are based on a politics of sameness shared with heterosexual people” (p. 168). Such sameness includes an emphasis on marriage equality and other institutional codified measures based on equal rights of LGBT people with straight people. For Hébert, radical social change for queer people can only emerge from queer political movements that emphasize and value difference over acceptance. Other scholars encourage a critique of heterosexuality, rather than a move toward sameness.

LGBT studies involves advocacy for equal rights and equal protection under the law, what some call the gay rights movement (Slagle, 2007). The result of such movements and scholarship are evident in Canadian society today: legalization of same sex marriage in 2005 and the more recently removed barriers for same sex couple adoption in Ontario. These are important strides for LGBTQ+ people and civil rights in Ontario and Canada. The limit, some critics say, to LGBT studies and this form of

advocacy is an overemphasis on the sameness of LGBTQ+ people and their needs, wants, and desires. Furthermore, LGBT studies involves assimilation of LGBTQ+ people into the so-called mainstream of society. Slagle (2007) articulates this conundrum or tension between LGBT studies and queer theory. The former advocates for the full participation and equal protection of LGBTQ+ people in society, whereas the latter highlights the importance of sexuality in all aspects of daily life and which “should be celebrated, encouraged, and welcomed” (p. 318). Hebert (2014) plays on this tension in the title of his work, *Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you*. Proponents or supporters of LGBT studies want equal treatment as privileged straight people regardless of sexuality or gender, which some argue makes queerness invisible. Queer theorists want to highlight differences and situate them at the center of relations with more privilege groups in society.

Critical Heterosexuality Studies

Seidman (1994) launches a critique of heterosexuality questioning its otherwise unquestioned dominance. Building on Seidman (1994), Fischer (2013) states that heterosexuality is a “taken-for-granted assumption regarded as normal, natural, and healthy” (p. 501). Heterosexuality, then, is a social construct with a set of specific, gendered, sexual rules (Fischer, 2013; Seidman, 1994). Sedgwick (1993) emphasizes that “there are stubborn barriers to making [heterosexuality] accountable, to making it so much as visible, in the frameworks of projects of historicizing and hence denaturalizing sexuality” (p. 10). Despite, heterosexuality’s omnipresence in society, it is often hard to pinpoint or see because it is normalized through endless repetition. Heteronormativity remains dominant through institutions like marriage, family and domestic life because “heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so full as history itself” (p. 11)

Rodriguez (2007) argues that the “popularization of queering and, more specifically, in terms of queering heterosexuality or straight (teacher) identity” highlight the complex relationship between queer

and straight. Rodriguez draws from queer theory as a post-modern theory concerned with sexual identity and power to explore what it might mean in theory or practice to queer straight teachers. Queer theory, according to Rodriguez, “positions itself, even if unwittingly, as the ‘sexual outlaw’ and conversely situates heterosexuality and heterosexual identity as hopelessly oppressive” (p. x). For Rodriguez, critical heterosexuality studies explore the nature of heterosexuality as an institution in order to destabilize heteronormativity.

Queer pedagogy. Educational practice that is guided by queer theory is known as “queer pedagogy.” Bryson and de Castell (1993) bring queer pedagogy into focus in their practice as university educators, and they highlight its transgressive possibilities. Queer pedagogy is “teaching against the grain ... an amalgam of performative acts ... enfleshing a radical form of what we envisioned to be potentially liberatory enactments of ‘gender treachery’” within the “heterosexually coded space of academic women’s studies programs” (p. 288). Put differently, queer pedagogy brings the boundary-pushing qualities of queer theory into classrooms through the teacher’s guiding philosophy. Unlike Britzman (1995), Bryson and de Castell (1993) believe there is a distance between queer theory and queer pedagogy, a distance they would like to decrease. This is no simple task, given the heteronormative relations of power and identity that are at work in a classroom. The goal of a queer praxis, then, is to engage in a “queerying of pedagogy” (p. 299). Bryson and de Castell (1993) highlight how gender, sexuality, identity, and relations of power are subject to continual change even as they may appear stable. As a result, one exclusive definition of queer pedagogy in their conceptions defies the foundations of queer theory itself.

Britzman (1995) joins Bryson and de Castell (1993) in bringing queer theory into the realm of education and pedagogy. According to Britzman, queer pedagogy posits “resistance as not outside of the subject of knowledge or the knowledge of subjects, but rather as constitutive of knowledge and its

subjects” (p. 154). What she means is that queer pedagogy is not an add-on or an after-thought, it is the foundation upon which sound educational practice is built. The limits of “thinkability,” Britzman says, are to “engage the limit of thought—where thought stops, what it cannot bear to know, what it must shut out to think as it does” (p. 156). Here, Britzman seems to encourage the reader to consider the way in which the naturalization of heterosexuality creates a category of (queer) persons that are “the dismissed, the unworthy, the irrelevant” (p. 156). Those who are excluded (queer people) are defined by their relationship to those who are included (straight people). Britzman challenges educators to push themselves to know (and learn) what may be difficult to learn.

Pinar (1998) emphasizes the importance of queer theory in the context of education because “homophobia (not to mention heterosexism) is especially intense in the field of education, a highly conservative and often reactionary field” (p. 1). For Pinar, queer pedagogy displaces and decenters the curriculum away from normalized heterosexuality. A queer curriculum is multi-faceted and malleable. Compulsory heterosexuality as a hegemonic practice helps elicit understandings of the naturalized norms and assumptions implicit within curriculum (Rich, 1980). Evoking similar ideas as Foucault (1978) and Halperin (1997), Pinar (1998) argues that heterosexuality’s meaning is contingent on homosexuality, the coherence of the former idea is predicated on the exclusion, repression, and repudiation of the latter. They are interdependent concepts, but instead of meeting as equals, are hierarchical and unequal. Elsewhere, Pinar (2007) articulates that, “queer pedagogy requires a self-reflexive examination of limitations” (p. 16). In other words, educators employing a queer pedagogy must engage in a continuous process of challenging their own (and others) barriers and short-sightedness.

Queer pedagogy, according to Luhmann (1998), “traverses identity demands central to other critical pedagogies and instead poses the question of how a ‘post-identity pedagogy’

becomes thinkable” (p. 120). Luhmann says that queer pedagogy must disrupt the binary of heterosexual as normal and homosexual as deficient. Presenting positive images of homosexual people (as is common in LGBT studies) is insufficient because it lacks a critical lens to challenge this position of this binary in and of itself. Can queer pedagogy resist “stable knowledge” and shift pedagogy “to an inquiry into the conditions for understanding, or refusing, knowledge” (p. 126)? Queer pedagogy is “about the process of risking the self” (p. 128). Risking the self as a teacher (and learner) or, put differently, trying to learn about one’s normalized assumptions is a key component of decolonization theory to which I now turn.

Decolonization Theory and Indigenous Scholarship

Indigenous scholars, such as Driskill et al. (2011), Finley (2011), and Morgensen (2011), make connections between decolonizing theory and queer theory. As an example, the way in which both theoretical frameworks position the ally binds queer theory to Indigenous studies and decolonization. Problematizing the role of the ally and complicating the characteristics of allyship are important components of settler-Indigenous relations as well as straight-queer ones.

Despite the affinities these theories share, I do not intend to borrow, appropriate, or recolonize the scholarship of Indigenous people in my positioning of queer theory and the challenging of straight privilege alongside it, nor do I plan to do so in my inclination to see the connections between them. Furthermore, I have no intention of using decolonization as a metaphor, as Tuck and Yang (2012) warn, in queer contexts. What they caution is the use of decolonization as an abstract concept, in a way that serves an argument in a particular discipline. Using decolonization as a metaphor denies the reality of colonization and re-inscribes, rather than sheds light on, the oppression experienced by Indigenous people under colonization. Instead, I view challenging straight privilege and white privilege as tangentially related efforts rooted in resistance to social hierarchies. In other words, I understand queer

theory and decolonization as compatible schools of thought connected primarily by their critique of privilege. As such, my work is inspired by the research of Indigenous scholars and those engaged (like me) in a decolonizing journey. I espouse the critiques found in both queer theory and Indigenous studies of privilege (white, colonial, straight) and the ways in which that privilege intersects with and regulates daily life. Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that, “the invisibilized dynamics of settler colonialism mark the organization, governance, curricula, and assessment of compulsory learning” (p. 12). I argue that systemic straight privilege in the forms of heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia act in similar ways in schools and society. Nevertheless, I heed Tuck and Yang’s (2012) warning that queer theorists (and others) should not seek to superficially adopt the language of decolonization for the purposes of queer goals. As do Driskill et al. (2011), I appreciate how the goals of both social movements are compatible and to understand that queer movements have much to learn from Indigenous ones.⁴ Driskill et al. (2011) refer to this relationship as a shared commitment toward reconciliation where queer studies and Indigenous studies are “linking arms together” to resist heteropatriarchy and Eurocentrism (p. 3).

Regan (2006) argues that settler people have a tendency to “deny, silence or minimize the on-going impacts of colonialism” (p. 19). Straight people, too, I argue, can have the same self-serving tendencies. In Margaret’s (2010) study of settler-Indigenous allyship, she claims that being an ally is “a practice and a process – not an identity. It is an on-going practice that is learned and developed through experience” (p. 12). Margaret’s conception of allyship resonates with claims made by Bishop (2002, 2012) and can be applied to straight allyship. Being an ally is meaningless as a concept if it is not put

⁴ In addition to consulting the literature on this topic during the research and analysis phase, I have sought the insight/advice of scholars engaged in decolonizing work to ensure my theoretical positing is respectful and non-appropriative.

into practice (Margaret, 2010). Key qualities of allies include courage and endurance, or what Margaret understands as “messaging up, learning, picking up and keeping on” (p. 12).

Finley (2011), a thinker engaged in queer Indigenous critiques, argues that heterosexism is a “symptom of colonization;” she maintains that it is the result of the shame First Nations peoples at Canadian residential schools were forced to endure on account of the schools’ practices of physical/sexual abuse and coercive regulation. According to Finley, straight privilege “disciplines and individualizes communally held beliefs by internalizing hierarchical gendered relationships and heteronormative attitudes toward sexuality. Colonialism needs heteropatriarchy to naturalize hierarchies and unequal gender relations” (p. 34). Heteropatriarchy, in other words, is the marriage of hetero/sexism and patriarchy that reinforces the dominance of straightness and maleness in society. Heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy are key “logics of colonialism” (p. 33). Heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy need to be challenged to dismantle colonialism.

This conviction is significant to my research because it demonstrates how queer politics and anti-colonial (decolonizing) movements are rooted in resistance to linked social hierarchies. Those who have an interest in dismantling the way both colonialism and heterosexuality regulate daily life will find they have a common adversary – heteronormativity. Finley points to “purposeful deconstructions of the logics of power” to end colonial dominance for Indigenous people (p. 34). Colonial sexualization of Indigenous peoples constructs them as peoples “incapable of self-governance without a heteropatriarchal influence” (p. 35). Finley (2011) also provides insights into the pervasive nature of oppression that exists within a colonial system. Resistance to colonialism and opposition to heteropatriarchy, I argue, can and should be bound together. Imperialism and colonialism require Indigenous people to fit within the heteronormative archetypes of an Indigeneity that was authentic in the past, but is culturally and

legally vacated in the present. Barker (2017) refers to Indigenous rights, sexuality, gender, and feminist studies as a “kaleidoscope whose unique turns emphasize different patterns, shadows, and hue, and thus, relationships between and within” (Chapter Introduction, Section 144, Para. 1). Those who undertake a decolonizing journey must not only evaluate privilege and power in both society and their daily lives, but should also unlearn the normalized gender order that came with European colonization of North America.

Battiste (2005), Root (2009), and Tompkins (2002) urge white educators to face their privilege within a Eurocentric, colonized system head-on. White educators must, Root (2009) says, be ever mindful of cultural appropriation in pursuit of decolonizing: “it is equally important for us [white educators] not to retreat from the colonial problem” (p. 108). Decolonizing journeys are chaotic because they challenge white/settler people to excavate their minds, habits, and beliefs. From this chaos healing from the pain and damage brought on by the collective experience of colonization is possible. Decolonizing journeys are experiences whereby non-Indigenous people deliberately undertake a process of self-reflection, challenge their white privilege, and recognize the ways in which their lives and minds have been colonized along with the Canadian landscape. The process of decolonization for white/settler people has parallels, I argue, to the process undertaken by straight teachers to recognize and challenge their heterosexual privilege. The similarity amongst these experiences exists in a recognition of privilege and of the power relations (colonialism) that structure everyday life in unquestioned ways.

Tompkins (2002) is among those critics who emphasize the need for dominant groups to unlearn their privilege. She points out that oppression is grounded and perpetuated in the privileged life experiences of dominant groups. By critically assessing privilege in their own lives, members of dominant groups (white people, straight individuals) take a vital step toward understanding the ways that racism, power, and privilege operate in society. Often, white/settler people mistakenly understand their

worldview as a universally acknowledged truth—one through which all people view and understand the world. Tompkins, like Battiste (2005, 2013), suggests a radical overhaul through rigorous self-reflection of Eurocentric epistemologies to relearn the way(s) we (settlers and Indigenous people alike) understand and see the world. Tompkins (2002) advocates for acknowledging and working towards a proliferation of epistemologies. This is an idea that is ideologically complementary with queer theory. The diversification Tompkins calls for refuses to privilege a single set of experiences (those of straight and/or white individuals) over a variety of other experiences (those of queer and/or Indigenous people).

Regulation of Straightness: Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Heteronormativity

As outlined above, queerness and queer pedagogies seek to resist social norms and dominant ways of being and knowing. Beyond a framework that pursues acceptance of the queer or generic “celebrations of diversity,” queer politics seek to transgress and even rewrite social norms, only to transgress them and rewrite them again in perpetuity, seeking spaces and realities where a multiplicity of ever-changing norms exists. Straightness, and therefore queerness, is highly regulated in school life, most often through homophobic acts and heterosexist expectations within a heteronormative framework.

Walton (2006) focuses on strategies to equip K–12 teachers and administrators with the tools they need to adequately address homophobic bullying in schools. The three concepts that Walton outlines as significant to this process are homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. Identifying and naming these phenomena can help educators understand the broader sociological forces at work within school-based bullying and address it, instead of shying away out of fear of discussing sex with teens, and particularly anal sex which is perceived, inaccurately, by some as “gay sex.” Indeed, this aversion to discussing sex in general and gay sex in particular is often cited as the reason for an educator’s failure to address homophobic harassment (GLSEN, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). Although sexuality is a legitimate terrain of discussion in age-appropriate ways, addressing homophobic bullying

is, in fact, not tantamount to teachers having conversations with students about sex or sexual activity. As Walton (2005) points out, understanding heterosexism and recognizing heteronormative assumptions are key to addressing the harassment in schools that arises within the matrix of sexuality and gender.

Pascoe (2007) outlines the role that gender performance, and particularly anti-normative performances, can play in the regulation of straightness. Regulation of gender performance, she argues, depends upon social context and social groups. That is, what may be considered a normative masculine (straight) performance within one socioeconomic and/or cultural group may be viewed as transgressive (queer) within another. For example, her study finds that dancing is usually an encouraged and acceptable expression of masculinity among African American male students. Among most white male students, however, dancing is typically seen as abnormal and, as such, masculinity of boys is policed through homophobic epithets like “fag” and “queer.” “Fag,” Pascoe says, “is not only an identity linked to homosexual boys but an identity that can temporarily adhere to heterosexual boys as well” (p. 53); such is particularly apparent in instances of gender non-conformity. Fear of homophobic responses in the form of name-calling and the threat of violence pressures males to conform to gender normative behaviour and also to bully or harass non-conforming males as a way of normalizing themselves or avoiding harassment.

According to Jackson (2006), heterosexuality is “a gender relationship ordering not only sexual life, but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources” (p. 107). Jackson identifies the ways that normalized heterosexuality regulate even straight people’s lives in its dominant form. For instance, straight people also should adhere to rigid norms and roles within their relationship. Although they occupy a position of social privilege, the boundaries of heterosexuality, like gender, are rigidly constructed and maintained (Butler, 2004; Pascoe, 2007). I present Jackson’s perspective to show the way that boundaries of heterosexuality are policed even for straight people. I am not presenting this to

show how straight people are oppressed (because they are not), but rather to show the pervasive nature of heteronormativity.

Rasmussen (2004) discusses the notion of streamed schools, what she calls queer spaces, for LGBTQ+ students. Although queer schools should provide a safer environment—one which honours and serves the student body more equitably than typical mainstream schools—they remain somewhat problematic. Queer schools, according to Rasmussen, re-inscribe the heteronormative premise that pervades mainstream schooling. In other words, queer schools remain at the opposite end of the heteronormative binary from mainstream schools. They do not necessarily re-envision new spaces and ways of being, but instead exist in opposition to mainstream schools⁵. The oppositional stance from which these (queer) schools are conceived remain linked to the very forces (homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity) they seek to resist. Queer students continue, under this model, to occupy space outside the norm instead of rewriting and reimagining norms within the mainstream. Segregating queer youth, by their choice or otherwise, reduces the possibility for queering mainstream school environments—and despite the shadow of heteronormalization they cast, it is possible for mainstream school spaces to be subversive sites. A typical response to overt forms of homophobic harassment in schools, in the broader context of school bullying and violence as a political issue, is the emergence of safe spaces in schools. Rasmussen takes exception to this method, asserting quick fixes to homophobia like this are insufficient for truly shifting culture and subverting heteronormative realities (she also considers anti-homophobia education and progressively intended segregated schools as insufficient quick fixes).

⁵ Examples of such safe space schools include Triangle, a school for LGBTQ+ identified students in Toronto (part of the Toronto District School Board) as well as the Harvey Milk School in New York.

I argue that an issue that Rasmussen perhaps gives short shrift is the importance of physical and emotional safety that is at the philosophical heart of segregated schools. Students who live with the daily emotional and physical violence that exists in schools may choose a safer reality, despite the theoretical limitations according to scholars such as Rasmussen. The goal of increased safety to learn seems like an important sentiment to foster. This does not mean that educators with queer pedagogies should stop work to shift the culture of mainstream schools. Instead, I suggest the two could exist in tandem, ensuring the safety of students right now and in the future. Continuing work for safer, mainstream school experiences is important because many students and their families live outside the major urban centers where segregated schools tend to exist.

In a Canadian context, Short (2013) identifies further complexities as regards heteronormativity. For instance, he outlines the ways that heteronormativity is not only hidden, but also overt within the curriculum. He emphasizes that, “the sense of heterosexual moral superiority, cultural achievement, and social privilege permeates all aspects of social life” (p. 117). Like Pinar (1998, 2007) and Rodriguez (2007), Short (2013) argues that heterosexuality’s subjectivity, its constructed normalcy, defines the queer *other*. In other words, queerness exists in relation to straightness and vice-versa (though not even-keeled). This relationship is dominated by heteronormativity, to which homosexuality poses a significant threat. Jackson (2006) argues that hegemonic heterosexuality enables heteronormativity to thrive, like the way that hegemonic masculinity props up patriarchy (Connell, 2007; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). To this potent social construct, in schools in particular and in society more broadly (Pascoe, 2007), homosexuality once again stands as a threat. Similar to Rasmussen (2004), Short (2013) believes that queer spaces in schools have the potential to be transformative and resist heteronormativity, that they are “a place where potential resistance may find expression” (p. 120).

Yep (2002) outlines the violent impact of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity on everyday life for LGBTQ+ students (and staff) in educational settings. He underscores the urgent need for more activism for LGBTQ+ people in schools. The ideological power of heteronormativity, according to Yep, is its “invisibility disguised as ‘natural’, ‘normal’, ‘universal’ – its ‘it-goes-without-saying’ character” (p. 168). He further argues that administrators and educators can and should do more than offer politically neutered anti-homophobia initiatives in schools, like poster campaigns. He calls for “a more complete understanding of the oppressiveness of our current sexual hierarchy” and adds that, with this broadened understanding, “everyone can celebrate their own form of human sexual expression rather than having ‘LGBT Pride Day’ once a year against the backdrop of ‘Everyday is Heterosexual Pride Day’” (p. 174). The suggestion Yep makes here seems to suggest that everything and anything goes. I think that is a potentially dangerous proposition because certainly straightness gets enough time in the limelight. I present Yep’s idea to emphasize the importance of making space for expressions of gender and queer sexualities.

To summarize the preceding discussion, it is evident that, despite the efforts of LGBTQ+ activists and their allies in schools, straightness maintains its dominance. My research seeks to understand how straight privilege, and the concomitant failure to address its pervasiveness, affects otherwise well-meaning initiatives to mitigate homophobia in schools. Addressing heteronormativity and heterosexism by highlighting straight privilege (a by-product of these more covert forms of homophobia) is crucial to upending the system of gender/sexuality dominance in schools.

Regulation and Social Construction of Straightness in Schools

Schools are not completely autonomous from broader social influences like government, family/socialization, and economic forces, but they are also not completely dependent, having some autonomy in shaping school culture (Wotherspoon, 2004). As I discuss above, heteronormativity,

heterosexism, and homophobia are typically a highly salient part of school life (Eyre, 1993; Nicholls, 2013; O’Conor, 1995; Walton, 2006). Schools as institutions and in many cases, their staff and students, construct and regulate heteronormative ideals (GLSEN, 2011; Ngo, 2003; Short, 2013; Taylor et al., 2011; Yep, 2002).

Delpit (1988) posits that, within schools, a culture of power exists that benefits dominant groups to the detriment of marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ students and/or racialized students. In line with Foucault’s (1978) work on relations of power, Delpit (1988) argues that power is enacted in classrooms, establishing rules for participants that reflect the culture of the dominant group. For the less powerful, learning the rules of the dominant culture could help them acquire a certain measure of power, but in this scenario the existing systems are still maintained rather than eroded. According to Delpit (1988) individuals or groups who have power, like those with privilege, are “frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 282). This pattern, I argue, can be applied to understanding sexual and gender diversity in schools. For educators who consider themselves to be progressive or radical there is discomfort in acknowledging their social power. Delpit (1988) argues that discomfort is necessary for mobilizing resistance movements. Inaction on the part of privileged teachers only solidifies their dominance. Fortunately, educators, she says, can use their position within educational institutions for resistance and change. A teacher can “agitate for change—pushing gatekeepers to open their doors to a variety of styles and codes” (p. 292). For Bishop (2013), these gatekeepers are allies. Teachers who choose to agitate for change, Delpit reminds readers, must accept a complete reworking of the current culture in schools from which they benefit. Such a reworking could take the form of decolonizing schools (Battiste, 2013) or queering schools (Pinar, 1998; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007).

Explicitly oppressive and regulatory school policies prohibiting homosexuality and reinforcing conventional gender norms once prevailed. Some of these policies forbade the hiring of homosexual teachers and married women with children (Blount & Anahita, 2004). While policies like these may have changed in Ontario schools in recent years, homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and transphobia abound (GLSEN, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). These may manifest themselves in unofficial hiring practices and promotions that may involve covert oppression or discrimination; however, in other scenarios, such as in school-based violence and bullying, their effects are still quite overt. Taken together, overt and covert forms of discrimination and oppression create unsafe environments for LGBTQ+ students. Research focusing on LGBTQ+ youth in schools provides valuable data for educators, researchers, parents, and Canadians (Taylor et al., 2011). O'Connor (1995) states that heterosexism is "a salient force in schools because curricula continue to reflect heterosexist assumptions, homophobic slurs are commonplace, and the school system has failed to support lesbian and gay students and teachers" (p. 274). Legal and policy changes have shaped the nature of overt hiring practices in schools, but the lived experiences within schools for students and teachers are often tenuous and inequitable.

While heterosexism remains alive and well in schools, Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt (2004) point out that "liberal understandings of complex matters, such as identity, tolerance, safety, and equity" dominate discourse about youth and sexuality in those very same institutions (p. 2). This perspective doubly stigmatizes queer youth because they are perceived as individuals who declare themselves anti-normative—both queer and sexual. This distinguishes them from the normalized expectation—that one is straight and asexual, or sexually inexperienced and timid. This is especially true for girls/women. Rasmussen et al. (2004) support the role of allies, however, they caution that the actions of straight allies, especially liberal-minded ones in queer movements, can lead to a desexualization and

normalization that “can drive out the ‘queerest of the queers’” (p. 5). Straight allies must ensure that they neither occupy space that should exist for the most marginalized people with whom they seek alliances nor recreate social norms and hierarchies with themselves in greater positions of power and privilege. Further effects of such normalization include the possibility of entrenching genders and sexualities as static and fixed; indeed, this is the very enterprise queer politics and pedagogies should be trying to resist.

Rasmussen et al. (2004) further argue that queer youth in America have been, and continue to be, largely excluded from broader societal conversations about queer issues. Anti-homophobia efforts are well intentioned in their naming of and resistance against, homophobia, but such efforts are limited in their effectiveness because they operate within a political discourse that privileges straightness over queerness. Instead, they are reactionary (Rasmussen, 2004; Rasmussen et al., 2004). Elsewhere, Rofes (2004) argues that much of the work of GSAs (the primary host of anti-homophobia work in schools) focuses on the trope of LGBTQ+ youth as target-martyr-victim even if the work of GSAs is to resist these normative assumptions. While these tropes may be invoked with good intentions, they fail to transcend the traditional binary of sexual identity wherein straight youth are assigned subjectivity and queer youth remain objectified and victimized. Anti-homophobia efforts like those that occur in some GSAs are necessary, but they still fall short in the work of shaping cultures in schools that are inclusive and supportive, normatively, of LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, and families.

Queering schools. Efforts have emerged across Canada, led by staff and students alike, to address rampant homophobia. For example, students often participate in Pride parades and organize their own Pride groups, such as GSAs, and unions have equity committees to encourage progressive change. While it is true that strategies need to be implemented to address the oppressive mechanisms under which queer students learn in schools, anti-homophobia efforts have significant limitations.

Simply being against the systematic oppression of a group of people does not address the more fundamental issue: the privileging of straight people through the fostering (conscious or otherwise) of heteronormative assumptions.

Responding to this shortcoming, some scholars call for action that goes beyond anti-homophobia initiatives. Goldstein, Russell, and Daley (2007), for instance, advocate for a queering of schools that involves “pedagogical practices that trouble the official knowledge of disciplines, disrupt heteronormativity, and promote an understanding of oppression as multiple, interconnected, and ever changing” (p. 187). Similar to Bryson and de Castell (1995), Yep (2002) and Rasmussen (2004), Goldstein et al. (2007) argue that one-off Pride days are insufficient to honour, not simply tolerate, the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. Some in-school campaigns do notable work, raising awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. From my vantage point as a former secondary school teacher, I have witnessed an increase in the frequency of conversations about gender and sexuality and a greater emphasis on inclusion and safety for LGBTQ+ youth. However, the primary limitation of many of these initiatives is that they do not challenge, address, or discuss straight privilege, an important factor when discussing equity issues. Privilege is a valuable part of the conversation, but it is also the elephant in the room. If straight privilege is a topic on which people remain silent, schools will continue to reinforce homophobia, heteronormativity, and heterosexism (Fischer, 2013; Ingraham & Saunders, 2016; Pinar 1998; 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). Schools should move, instead, toward a queering model of schooling wherein the experiences of queer youth are validated by schools as institutions in similar ways as their heterosexual counterparts (Goldstein et al., 2007). Ingraham and Saunders (2016) articulate a concept they call the heterosexual imaginary. That is, the ways that heterosexuality seems omnipresent even if it is not overt. The heterosexual imaginary includes “ways of thinking that conceal how heterosexuality structures gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an institution” (p. 1).

Concerned with the way that heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 2004; Rich, 1980) anchor critical heterosexuality studies, the authors argue that “by leaving heterosexuality unexamined we do not examine how it is learned, what keeps it in place, and the interests it serves in the way it is practiced” (p. 2).

Kumashiro’s (2000) anti-oppressive pedagogy provides a mechanism to queer schools and classrooms. Anti-oppressive education offers a platform for educators who seek to end discrimination in all its many forms and intersections—including, but not limited to, sexism/heterosexism, racism, classism, and ableism—within their classrooms and schools. Kumashiro posits that a failure to “work against the various forms of oppression [racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, classism] is to be complicit with them” (p. 29). Kumashiro reminds educators that, to work toward ending oppression, teachers must be able to name it. Naming oppression requires seeing inequity and/or relations of power playing out in a systematically disadvantageous way for individuals or groups in a school or classroom. He also emphasizes that addressing one form of marginalization (e.g., sexism) and ignoring others (e.g., racism, decolonization, ableism), is an incomplete and fragmented approach to confronting oppression. Changing oppressive dynamics rooted in these power inequities requires what he calls disruptive knowledge not as an end, but rather as “a means toward the always-shifting end/goal of learning more” (p. 34). Kumashiro’s (2004) framework provides a solid foundation from which straight teachers can advocate for a queering of schools instead of engaging in reactionary, surface-level strategies that are often the limit or extent of anti-homophobia efforts.

Short (2014) questions whether or not combating homophobia in schools should rest on the shoulders of teachers (and students). He highlights the role that the legal system can and should have in influencing heteronormative school culture. Support for GSAs, under Bill 13 in Ontario, sends a message to all students that LGBTQ+ students are welcome in schools. Furthermore, the bill emerges

“out of a culture of bullying that officially recognizes that homophobic and transphobic bullying occurs in schools and that it shouldn’t be considered a generic form of harassment” (p. 332). He highlights the power of such legislation, for example, in instances where administrators have been reluctant or hesitant to name and deal with homophobic and transphobic bullying and pushes for shifts in school culture (Short, 2014). Like Kumashiro (2000) and Goldstein et al. (2007), Short (2014) emphasizes that, “mere ‘inclusive’ education is inadequate. More broad-based approaches of anti-oppressive education, which place culture itself in its sights, including the privileged and the othered, are required” (p. 340). He challenges people outside schools to assume responsibility and shift heteronormative culture, emphasizing that teachers and principals alone should not be responsible for creating this change. I think that allies occupy space in social movements in a multiplicity of contexts. Activist-minded teachers are unlikely to want to stand idly by and witness systemic forms of discrimination in schools. Like Short (2014), I think anti-homophobia activism should not rest solely on the shoulders of teachers. Pressure for systemic change from within social institutions like schools, will benefit from external pressure, policy, and leadership.

For MacIntosh (2007), school-based explorations of homophobia unintentionally re-enforce sameness and often fall short in their goal to include queer perspectives. Those who create safe spaces in schools often fail to clarify who it is that may need to feel safe. Too often, inclusive programming focuses on eradicating homophobia, instead of recognizing “heteronormativity as a live incendiary device—and curriculum its tripwire” (p. 36). GSAs have the potential to disrupt heteronormativity and acknowledge the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, but this potential does not necessarily translate into action. Schools may go so far as to acknowledge the damage heteronormativity does to queer youth, but doing so does not necessarily result in changes to school policy. Students (and teachers) involved in GSAs, both queer and straight, are often positioned in school environments as positive role models.

According to MacIntosh (2007), the trouble with role models is that they create “a homogeneous and successful gay/lesbian ideal juxtaposed to which there can only be a failed queer body” (p. 39). Too often, well-intended allies depend too heavily on GSAs, perceiving them to be the sole vehicle through which work by and for sexual minority youth and allies can and should occur.

GSAs and safe spaces. Kitchen and Bellini’s (2013) study explored the role of GSAs in Ontario schools, including the role of advisors. Most GSA advisors in Kitchen and Bellini’s study were female, and the majority of those were also straight-identified. Many of the study’s straight teachers who identify as activists engage in Day of Action-style events, which represent the lion’s share of advocacy activities for LGBTQ+ students in schools (p. 21). Membership in GSAs is predominantly female, with advisors identifying that the majority of participants are straight, something that is reiterated in Goldstein and Davis’ (2010) comprehensive study of heterosexual allies on a college campus. The allies in Goldstein and Davis’ study are a much more homogeneous group than the diverse population on the rest of the campus. Moreover, the majority of allies in Goldstein and Davis’ study are “white, female, politically liberal, and religiously inactive social science and humanities majors” (p. 489). Most joined the alliance because of friends/family, a commitment to human rights issues, and a desire to know more about LGBTQ+ people. The authors claim that motivations to become an ally are rooted in the social justice values of the would-be allies. Interestingly, their study found that despite commitments to social justice, there was considerable fear amongst the straight ally participants of being perceived as LGBTQ+. I suggest such fear of being perceived as LGBTQ+ carries some insidious and unchecked prejudice. Is it acceptable and possible to be a friend or ally to LGBTQ+ people while simultaneously trying to avoid being perceived as queer by others? This is an example of the perils of unexamined straight privilege, especially powerful because it emerges from Goldstein and Davis’ (2010) study of self-identified straight allies.

Some scholars try to unpack such unexamined privilege. Schniedewind and Cathers (2003), for instance, focus on anti-racism and anti-sexism teacher training workshops in a rural New York school board. At the outset of the study, before participants had received any training, they note that, compared with their awareness (at least in abstraction) of sexism and racism, “heterosexism was the area about which participants had the least initial consciousness” (p. 190). After receiving training, teacher participants in this study were more likely to capitalize on homophobic and heterosexist remarks as teachable moments and worked to integrate equity teachings into their curriculum delivery. After training, teachers were more prepared to address gender and sexuality-based discrimination. They also sought institutional changes and created GSAs or other diversity clubs. Significant to this study is basic social justice literacy or, in this case, lack thereof amongst would-be teacher allies and advocates. On-going training and peer support are critical for teachers to continue to challenge homophobia, heterosexism and to upend heteronormativity in schools.

Challenging heterosexism and heteronormativity. Ngo (2003) explored interventions and awareness raising campaigns in an American high school. She found that interventions to promote inclusion of LGBTQ+ youth and attempts to address heterosexism and homophobia in schools had “minimal impact” and that social norms were often re-inscribed by teachers (p. 117). The author frequently overheard homophobic and heterosexist comments from a variety of students in classroom and social settings, and students reported often being “hassled because they look gay, for saying the wrong things, for wearing the wrong clothes, or for wearing their clothes the wrong way” (p. 118). According to Ngo, re-telling the experiences or re-presenting LGBTQ+ youth and their identities as unique and different perpetuates the normalization of heterosexuality in schools. Like Pascoe’s study (2007), Ngo (2003) found that male students in particular upheld the heteronormative status quo, harassing male classmates if they failed to adhere to the gendered code of dress and social performances.

In this particular school, a gap existed between the staff and students wherein “the staff is educated and proactive, [and] the students are predominantly intolerant” (p. 118). The author indicates that the gap may be more based in staff perception than reality. Ngo shows that there was an entrenched discourse where staff perceive themselves in one way, often in opposition to the students and other staff members. Notably, despite ideas about their own proactivity, staff allies often shied away from addressing homophobia and heterosexism in their curriculum. Like Kumashiro (2000), Ngo (2003) indicates that teachers often re-inscribe heteronormativity in their complicity. She suggests that authentically challenging homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity in school settings requires a commitment from staff to “transform conventional discourses” that inform the ways that people think about the world around them (p. 123). From my perspective, such transformations should be rooted in anti-oppressive, queering, and decolonization pedagogies. Similarly, Griffin and Ouellett (2002) contend that, “although GSAs can play a vital role in making schools safer and more inclusive places for all students, GSAs are only part of the bigger picture” (p. 2). They call for broader institutional and policy changes because “individual students and staff come and go. Without a change through a school’s organizational setting, the gains of one year may be lost” (p. 2). It is critical to the process of changing the over-arching school setting to have the support of the principal/administrator. Often the pressure to shift school culture comes from a dedicated group of students and teacher allies, but a larger scale shift in school culture is required. An administrator may have greater longevity—and certainly more influence in terms of policy development—to ensure longer-term, macro shifts in school culture.

Challenging Heterosexuality

If queering school culture, rather than implementing anti-homophobia efforts, is the “what” of working against heterosexual privilege and heteronormativity in schools, another important consideration is the “who.” Who are the people that lead or guide the process? For Short (2013), the

“who” should include people outside of the school system. Griffin and Ouellett (2002) contend that institutional leaders and policies should guide the queering of schools. Often, the leaders of social change in schools are students and staff (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2014). Many LGBTQ+ youth and adults work towards greater equity in schools as part of GSAs, on administrative or policy-developing committees (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Ngo, 2003; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). There are also many straight-identified staff and student allies who participate in GSAs (Eichler, 2010; GLSEN, 2011; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2014; Russell, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). I fall into this category, having worked alongside youth in GSAs, coordinating and organizing awareness days, all in the name of ending homophobia. This process has shaped me as an educator, an academic, a community member, and as a person. While such efforts of straight teachers as queer advocates yield benefits, especially for GSA members, straight peoples’ participation is not entirely unproblematic. One limitation within these groups is that like-minded people gather to discuss gender and sexuality (human rights) issues from a perspective and in a way that they fundamentally agree upon. But, what about those who do not agree? Too often, GSAs can involve preaching to those already converted. Thus, I turn my attention to the legitimacy of straight teachers like myself who assume an advocacy role in the context of homophobia, heterosexism, and, ultimately, heteronormativity in schools.

In problematizing such legitimacy, I do not mean to suggest that allies are not important in the work of shaping schools into more equitable spaces for LGBTQ+ students. On the contrary, allies are important figures in struggles to end oppression—and part of that struggle is their own challenging and difficult journey as they unpack their privilege alongside persons who are more marginalized. Freire (1968/2011) cautions allies of liberation movements against positioning themselves as “executors of the transformation” (p. 60). Ally teachers add to an already challenging and busy professional life by taking

on the responsibilities of advocating for LGBTQ+ youth, a choice that they should be acknowledged for undertaking, particularly given the lack of training, resources, and/or release time they receive.

However, allies, being human, can forget that they carry privilege and inadvertently reassert their dominance while trying to work against oppressive mechanisms. Questioning oppressor culture is essential for allies. It is also work that is never total or complete. It is, and should be, an on-going process requiring responsiveness and adaptability. Self-reflexivity is essential for privileged persons who choose to work against oppressive mechanisms in schools and society. They are also foundational and complementary to Kumashiro's (2000; 2004) conception of anti-oppressive pedagogy.

Ally identifications. Schlichter (2004) proposes the notion of the *queer straight*, that is, persons who are heterosexual but engage in queer publics and politics, resist dominant narratives of gender and sexuality (Warner, 1993), and seek to deconstruct and reconstruct a heterosexual identity as part of an "anti-normative knowledge project" (p. 545). Queer straights, in Schlichter's conception, undergo an identity process known as a "queer becoming" (p. 549). A queer becoming is the process through which straight people become immersed in queer communities and culture. Although Pinar and Rodriguez (2007) frame the queer straight as something political and not necessarily about identity, it concerns me that a queer straight identification is a repackaging of straight privilege and entitlement. For me, it is quite likely a dangerously appropriative concept. Queer becoming might be an apt description of Foertsch's (2000) identity journey, one that focuses on her experiences as a straight feminist and her proximity (both in body and in mind) to a lesbian feminist experience. Her words are cautionary as she muses upon the contrast between herself, a straight feminist with queer politics, and her queer acquaintances, friends, and associates: "I can read (or listen to) what she has to say, but I cannot walk a mile in her shirt" (p. 49). In other words, she recognizes the knowledge gap between lived experiences as a straight person and theoretical alliance with queer or lesbian women, not to mention the power and

privilege of being straight. Allies of queer people may choose to question the social privilege afforded to them by virtue of their (perceived) sexual orientation, but their proximity to queerness does not make them or their experiences queer in the same way.

Smith (2000) also offers a perspective on queer straightness. Reflecting on his experiences and personal growth as a result of time spent living, schooling, socializing, and working in the San Francisco area, he remarks upon being a straight man in predominantly queer communities—a straight minority. He identifies this phase of his life as the time when his queer straight identity was forged, and describes queer straightness as the “testy love child of identity politics and shifting sexual norms” (p. 65). One does not have to be gay to be queer, as queerness is both rooted in sexuality and “disruptive, radical acts (sexual and otherwise)” (p. 66). To illustrate, he identifies that many of his gay friends were uncomfortable with radical or queer political acts, while he was not. Smith claims “queer heterosexual” as his identification because of his “own desires for a world of multiple possibilities rather than as a means of benefitting from queer chic” (p. 66). This is a challenging social position to occupy because allies run the risk of being co-opters of social movements if their privilege remains unchecked (Freire, 1968/2011; Hunter, 1992).

Although the queer straight (or queer heterosexual) identity may have some viability for straight people, it is not without its challenges nor free of controversy. Queer heterosexual seems to me like another form of straight entitlement, which does not fulfill goal of creating multiple possibilities, but instead repackages straight privilege. Unlike Schlichter (2004) who highlights the distinction between queer experiences and straight allyship, Smith (2000) claims that a union of the two is possible. Important and necessary questions arise: Can a straight person adopt a queer identity without co-opting a social movement and reinforcing oppression for queer folks in the process? Is such an identity an appropriation of a discursive space that straight people have no right to claim? If queerness is an

identification that is forged upon valuing differences amongst persons, that is transcendent of rigidly constructed boundaries of identity, then is it possible that a straight person could identify with these key components of queerness?

These debates aside, engaging in queer discourse, even queer politics and activism, differs greatly from identifying as a queer person. For a person to identify as queer requires a critical experiential component that is not rooted in sex or sexuality, but instead, upon the experiences of oppression that exist for queer people in schools, workplaces, and family life. Straight people may choose to empathize, support, and ally themselves with queer people and political movements. They may seek opportunities to confront or use their position of privilege in ways that serve equity projects and social justice. That they carry a privilege afforded to them because of their straightness is a critical point. Privilege means not having to “come out” to family and not needing to worry about the safety of themselves or their partners (Johnson, 2006; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2002). In short, throughout daily life, straight people are validated normatively by institutional systems, social assumptions and practices, and presumptions about gender and sexuality norms (Fischer, 2013; Jackson, 2006; Seidman, 1994; Yep, 2002). However, assuming a queer straight identity, it seems, lies too close to the line of transgression and co-opting that Freire (1968/2011) warns allies about.

There are straight people who do not do harm to LGBTQ+ people, but still maintain a system of “heterosexual hegemony” and the harm that it causes (p. 279). The link between homophobic straight people and those who do not act in a mean-spirited way is the way that these groups of people lack “critical engagement with (hegemonic) heterosexuality” (p. 279). Like Rodriguez (2007) and Schlichter (2004), and in contrast to Thomas (2000), I think that radical heterosexuality or the queering of heterosexuality should not be about claiming some form of queer identity, but rather about “deconstructing the processes by which heterosexuality

and identity are institutionalized as hegemonic” (p. 300). Put differently, straight people should not (and perhaps cannot) carve out a form of queer identity for themselves. They should instead focus on dismantling a heterosexist system that privileges them in the first place.

Ruffolo (2007) articulates that “the radical process of queering straight teachers does not attempt to replace ‘straight’ identity with ‘queer’ identity (identity politics), but instead works to trouble how and why ‘straight’ ‘identities’ become intelligible (politics of identity)—exposing how straight teachers can become queerly intelligible giving an account of queer” (p. 257). Queering straight teachers is all about moving away from identity and into identifications. However, this conception is still somewhat lacking for me because of the way that straight people are afforded privilege because of their straightness.

Radical heterosexuality. Thomas (2000) also explores the extent to which “an otherwise ‘straight’ subject [can] elaborate a queer criticism” (p. 11). He examines what straight people can do to bolster LGBTQ+ equity movements. He conceptualizes the possibilities for straight allies to work productively and respectfully on *queering* projects. The challenges are more about acknowledging heteronormative privilege. Heterosexuality, despite being perceived as monolithic and unchanging, is “constantly set about trying to prove itself, assert itself, insist on itself” (p. 28). In this way, heterosexuality is a series of repetitive performances that could lead to reified oppression on the part of well-intentioned straight allies. Thomas (2000) suggests that *radical heterosexuality*, or “self-conscious straightness,” acknowledges queerness within its identification, while also keeping privilege ripe for rigorous self-reflection for straight people (p. 30). Straight people must organize and mobilize to dismantle heteronormative culture. Thomas gives voice to the complex experiences of straight individuals doing queer work, including the multiplicity of spaces they occupy. His construction of the self-reflective radical heterosexual constitutes a person who is a thoughtful and powerful ally for change

and one that engages in respectful praxis and dialogue without over-stepping the boundaries of ally into a co-opter of a movement. Furthermore, the identity of the straight allies, in his conception, is rooted in the reality of their lived privilege: straightness. Radical *hets* can disassociate themselves from the oppressive mechanisms of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia. Some people, and especially privileged ones, may not see the importance of focusing on labeling a particular identity. I argue that doing so affords space from which radical-hets can continue to work alongside their queer allies in a respectful way that is rooted in transparency and critical praxis.

Covert heterosexism. Anti-homophobia work in the form of GSA activism like Day of Pink and Day of Silence⁶ are important and significant for raising awareness about unsafe school environments and other overt forms of discrimination. Yet, awareness days are limited in their effectiveness to address the larger, more covert problem in schools: heterosexism and heteronormativity. Heterosexism and the normalizing of heterosexuality (heteronormativity) are rooted in the overriding hegemony of traditional gender roles and so-called gender appropriate behaviour (Meyer, 2007). Everyone, not just LGBTQ+ youth, is constrained by hegemonic, patriarchal gender roles, although gender non-conforming and LGB youth are the most overtly and negatively affected. According to Meyer (2007), the traditionally defined gender roles in schools that are rooted in patriarchy “severely limit girls’ opportunities to be assertive, physically strong, and competitive; boys’ opportunities to be creative, sensitive, and cooperative; and gender non-conforming youths’ opportunities to express their gender freely” (p. 20).

Students often experience homophobic harassment because they defy (or are perceived to be

⁶ Day of Pink (sometimes known as Pink Shirt Day) and Day of Silence are school-based events where students and staff are encouraged to wear pink and/or take a vow of silence as a symbol of resisting homophobic bullying and the way that the experiences of queer youth are silenced (<http://dayofpink.org/>; <http://www.dayofsilence.org/>)

defying) compulsory and/or presumed heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Eyre (1993) identifies that “failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution would be akin to failing to admit the variety of forces that maintain the economic system of capitalism” (p. 274). When LGB students are harassed, teachers often identify the harassment as homophobic in nature; this is not entirely incorrect, but neither is it completely accurate. Failing to see the broader heterosexist, gendered picture, according to Meyer (2007), reinforces “heterosexual male hegemony” in schools (p. 20). Teachers are often limited in their ability to challenge covert heterosexism because of the dominant construct of “professionalism,” including the “surveillance and policing of bodies and language” and the unquestioned “heterosexism of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities” (p. 23). Meyer’s (2007) argument about the discourse of professionalism builds on Foucault’s (1978, 1986) writing about public discourse that is guided by power relations. An example of Meyer’s (2007) conception of the discourse of professionalism emerged in my own (Potvin, 2011) research of masculinity amongst high school males during my master’s degree. One participant, Robert (pseudonym), recounted an incident where an administrator and teacher regulated and policed his gender expression:

My example [of gender policing] is with my co-op [cooperative education/work placement] last year. Me, personally, I will wear makeup and eyeliner and while my family is okay with makeup/cosmetics and not okay with cross-dressing, my co-op teacher and co-op supervisor did not like me wearing makeup, and I was, like, why? When they told me it was unprofessional to wear cosmetics to work because I was a guy, I asked what made it professional that women could wear them and men couldn’t, they did not have an answer other than, ‘that’s the way it is’. For a while, I continued on doing that [wearing cosmetics] until the Vice Principal stepped in and told me I couldn’t. I tried to get permission for it, but I was not able, so I just didn’t wear eyeliner to school anymore. I probably would if I could, now that I don’t have a co-op anymore,

but after all that happened last year [I doubt I'd be allowed to I'd] probably be told 'no' for some other reason. (Potvin, 2011)

In this example, Robert articulates his own experience of being policed by a teacher and administrator who hold greater power in relation to his role as a student. The gender policing by the teacher and administrator was enacted within a dominant discourse of professionalism.

Heterosexuality is glorified and normalized in schools in other ways as well, such as during social events like Halloween dances and proms. As a teacher supervisor, I witnessed countless students permitted to dress in drag as a "costume," such as males wearing make-up and dresses, looking and acting "like women" and, because of the nature of the event (a costume party/dance), they were not gender policed like Robert. When gender-bending (in the case of costumed students) occurs at an extra-curricular event, often with an undertone of mockery, it is typically deemed acceptable. However, gender play in the form of a student's sincere identity exploration is not because it is a direct challenge to the heterosexist and heteronormative gender order in schools.

If there is any question about the way heterosexuality is normalized, Ontarians need to look no further than the recent attempts by LGB students to subvert prom culture (Callaghan, 2007). In 2002, Marc Hall took his school board to court for his publicly-funded, Catholic school's refusal to permit him to bring his same-sex partner to the prom (Grace & Wells, 2005). It would be a mistake to assume from this case that heterosexism and heteronormativity are only salient in Ontario's publicly-funded Catholic schools. With his mother's support (he was a minor at the time of the claim), Gabe Picard, a graduate of a secular and publicly-funded high school in Thunder Bay was successful in winning his complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission in 2004 because of his on-going experiences of systemic homophobia as a high school student (Houston, 2011). Incidentally, Mr. Picard attended the same school I began teaching at in 2008 as a new, relatively inexperienced teacher. I was approached by students to

take on the role of staff advisor for a GSA they wanted to form at the school. At the time, I did not realize the political context of the school board nor did I know of the aforementioned human rights case. One of the outcomes of the human rights case was that the school board I was working for was mandated to start GSAs in all high schools. In my role as a GSA teacher lead, I began to formalize my straight teacher activism in my professional environment. This marks an important moment in my ally journey. At this point, I was not thinking about the nature of allyship or radical heterosexuality. I simply believed I was doing the right thing as a compassionate educator. I naively thought allyship was a static identity. This research, then, explores the tumultuous terrain of allyship through the experiences of straight teacher allies in Ontario schools.

Summary

The preceding review of literature explores the theoretical frameworks for my research on queer theory and decolonization, emergent from a critical theory tradition. I outline the way that queer theory emerged after the post-modern turn in academic thinking, with particular emphasis on its emergence in sociology. I expound on heterosexuality and its role in queer theory and also present a critique of straightness. Queer pedagogies and anti-oppressive education are also highlighted. I contextualize these arguments in schools for teachers. This literature review lays the foundation for my research on straight allies in schools.

Grounded in queer theory, and informed by critiques of privilege like decolonization theory, I explore the experiences of straight ally activist educators because of the important role they currently play in anti-homophobia initiatives in schools (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2016). Despite their predominance as allies, the experiences of straight ally educators have been insufficiently studied. There is an emerging body of work that focuses on the motivations and experiences of teachers allies and the positive impacts they have in the lives of the youth with whom they work (see, for instance, Kitchen &

Bellini, 2013; and LaPointe, 2014; 2015). Another area of importance for study, one that I focus extensively on in my research study, is the role that straight privilege plays in their practices as allies and activists. On the one hand, leveraging or spending one's privilege to help others seems like a noble and important act. On the other hand, straight ally educators' motivations and awareness of privilege should be analyzed and in some cases, problematized. In addition to considering motivations for and awareness of allyship, this research asks: How does this awareness of privilege (or lack thereof) challenge the heteronormative and heterosexist status quo in K-12 schools?

My review of the literature indicates that direct challenges to heteronormativity and heterosexism are somewhat limited, even among trained, well-informed allies. Short (2013) contends that these challenges should come from outside the school system, while others (Goldstein et al., 2007; Kumashiro, 2000; Ngo, 2003; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2012; Yep, 2002) highlight the reality and necessity of the role of educators in making social change. I believe that pressure from inside educational institutions (LGBTQ+ youth, educators, school administration) and outside of the school system (lawyers, policy makers, politicians) is necessary in order to provide the necessary resources to shift heteronormative, heterosexist, and homophobic school culture.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My research explores the question: *How can straight teacher ally activists move beyond the limits of anti-homophobia education by challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools?* It is grounded in my own experiences as a straight teacher ally activist, as I described in the introductory chapter and rooted in the literature explored in the previous chapter. My research is as much a study of my own experiences and understandings of the straight teacher ally role as it is of other teachers like me (including the participants I worked with), who are also straight-identified and have assumed the role of ally to LGBTQ+ youth. Before moving into a discussion of narrative inquiry, which is the guiding methodology for this research, I attend to a discussion of the importance of decolonization theory and a concept that I abandoned in the development of this research: de-het journeys, which I will explain the next section. I discuss the emergence of the term and my rationale for subsequently abandoning its use to demonstrate my own self-reflexivity (reflecting on my learning and creating a new sense of self) in this research.

The Importance of Decolonization Theory in Critiques of Privilege

As a result of *The Great Twitter Debacle* in the fall of 2013 at the outset of my doctoral program, I started thinking about my many experiences as an ally. It seemed to me that over time, I began to “settle in” to what I thought was a static ally identity. My experiences as an ally helped to challenge deeply embedded homophobia and learned heterosexism in others and in myself. And, yet, despite this, I remain a privileged straight ally. *The Great Twitter Debacle* is a stark example of my privilege enacted. I regarded this set of experiences as an ally and the ways I challenge my own straight privilege as being similar to the process of decolonization that settler people undertake to unlearn their white/settler privilege. I conceived of the straight ally experience as one of challenging straight privilege over time. I spent some time trying to devise a label to encapsulate this journey and process to contest straight

privilege. I read, wrote, and talked about it as I ruminated. At last, I formulated a term: “de-heteronormative (or de-het) journey.” Although I was content to use the notion of a de-het journey for a while, I now believe it unnecessarily overcomplicates understandings of contesting straight privilege. Additionally, I feel it seems somewhat redundant. To my mind, new concepts (and the label attached to them) should help describe, encapsulate, and/or clarify an experience or set of experiences. I maintain that challenging straight privilege is important work for straight ally teachers to engage in and that the process can powerfully affect the learner. However, applying a label to the diverse experiences of straight teachers challenging their privilege while doing ally work is not entirely useful to help elicit greater understanding. More importantly, is the nature of straight teachers’ ally experiences and the ways that educators challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools with the goal of creating a framework to help straight ally teachers deepen their allyship. It is these experiences that I explore with the participants in this research.

There are a few other reasons that I no longer see the de-het label as valuable. For example, my desire to be respectful of Indigenous scholarship and to avoid the perils of using decolonizing as a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012) compels me to reject similar labels. I take seriously Tuck and Yang’s warning to avoid appropriating decolonization theory for other ends. To do so, according to Daza and Tuck (2014), could bring my dissertation into the “Whitestream of the settler academy” (p. 311) instead of keeping Indigenous experiences and stories of colonization at the center of discourse. I also do not think the “de-het journey” helps elicit richer understandings of the concepts I explore in a deeper, more nuanced way. I believe the core concepts of the de-het journey are relevant, but the term itself may not be useful in elaborating or eliciting greater understandings of the journey. Some of the core concepts include rooting out straight privilege, understanding allyship as a process not a place one arrives at, and acknowledging that there is not an ally “badge” one earns. I am also both aware and wary of using

unnecessarily complicated language to explain theories and ideas, and I am more interested in clarity and accessibility of writing and language use.

Despite moving away from “de-het journeys”, I am keenly interested in the experiences of straight teacher allies and their activism work with LGBTQ+ youth. What eventually emerged from my learning at the outset of this doctoral research was a focus on queer theory. Scholars in queer theory consistently emphasize the importance of challenging privilege to respectfully undertake ally work. By removing the “de-het” label, I feel as though I have cleared the table to make more room for the participants and their experiences. However, I cannot ignore the influence that Indigenous scholars’ critique of white/settler privilege has on my own thinking. Nor can I ignore the efforts I make (and have made) as a settler person and a scholar to decolonize my own ideas and ways of being. So, although this research itself may not focus on Indigenous issues per se, the influence of decolonizing and Indigenous scholars is an engrained part of my mindset as a researcher and educator. Queer theory is the anchoring perspective for my research and from that I explore the role of allyship in order to enhance the utility of queer theory in schools. I add narrative inquiry which provides a suitable methodological frame to explore, learn, and make meaning of straight teachers experiences as allies.

Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) highlight the ways in which narrative inquiry can “open up understandings of participant knowledge” (p. 575). They claim that, “narrative inquiry is a multi-dimensional exploration of experience involving temporality (past, present, and future), interaction (personal and social), and location (place)” (p. 576). In other words, through narrative inquiry, researchers can learn about what participants may know or have experienced what they may not explicitly or readily acknowledge. Researchers can explore participants’ experiences in different timeframes, their relationships, and the places they live and work. Within this

framework exists living, telling, reliving, and retelling the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry is a way of storying human experiences, or, in other words, examining "stories lived and told" (p. 20). Byrne (2017) articulates the value of narrative, stating that we, as human beings, "naturally talk about ourselves and our lives in a storied way and can learn much about our lives from these stories" (p. 37). Xu and Connelly (2010) state that narrative inquiry "grows out of practical studies of teacher knowledge and knowing" (p. 354). Narrative inquiry is also useful, according to Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013), for collecting data "in areas where it may be difficult to gain them using other methods" including areas where storytelling is an important part of understanding experiences (p. 229).

Like Xu and Connelly (2010), Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) characterize narrative inquiry as an examination of stories in a variety of contexts, including educational ones. Narrative inquiry researchers track process, experience, and progress of educational experiences through narrative. For example, *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* is an important anchoring narrative in my ally experience. It marks a moment in time where my identity as an ally was first disrupted and then resulted in a shift in my approach to allyship. My research is a product of that shift. The process of sharing and revealing my narrative (its telling and re-telling) is an important part in this research. However, I am also profoundly interested in analyzing the contributions of other teachers and their narratives and stories. As Clandinin (2006) suggests, narratives and stories about people's lives and the way they are told create "meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities" (p. 44)

Narrative inquiry provides the opportunity to explore the experiences of participants—in this case, straight ally teachers (including myself)—based on their own storying of their lived experiences

(Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Participant narratives should also include what I refer to in this dissertation as “bad stories,” like *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*. An analysis of both the bad and good stories can result in findings that may assist allies in improving their practice. Barone (2009) highlights the emergence of the “place of the political” in narrative research (p. 591). He points out that narrative research texts are “enmeshed in a web of power relationships and therefore are inherently value saturated and political” (p. 592). Narrative research, therefore, is well positioned for researchers who have an explicit political agenda for social change. Barone (2009) asserts that the reader of the research (or the audience) occupies the space with the greatest potential to make change. The political implications of narrative inquiry, including its ability to elicit information through storying experiences, make this methodology suitable (and preferable) for my research. A focus on multiple narratives from a number of participants and narratives from me (the researcher) creates a richer story of the data. The data do not rely on one narrative of a single person’s experience but on the stories of multiple people and their varied experiences that relate to a common theme: allyship (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

Because my impetus for this research is rooted in an experience, which I tell and re-tell in a storied way (*The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*), narrative inquiry is a foundational component of this research. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) articulate that “education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories” and that teachers and students play a role in one another’s stories or narratives (p. 2). Narrative inquiry may enable educational researchers to explore the relational experiences of teachers. Educational narrative inquiry-based research can produce “narratives of what it means to educate and be educated” (p. 12). The ability of narrative to communicate a variety of elements of an experience make it a suitable methodology. Narrative also enables participants to reflect upon experiences as they recount (or re-live) them that enables them to learn. I also emphasize and tease out the lines of distinction between what constitutes a good story and a bad story in the context of allyship.

As an ally, I have heard many other people recount their “good deeds” of allyship, quick to highlight their strengths and the positive impact (they perceive) they had on students. These good stories can be self-righteous and valorize the allies themselves. In my research, I also elicit bad stories or the stories that allies would rather not tell because they are not flattering or valorizing. These stories show the human face of allyship and can be great sites of learning for the allies themselves.

Research Design

Under the guidance of narrative inquiry, my research comprises two key moments in time, or phases of data collection: a preliminary survey using Google Docs⁷ and one-on-one follow-up interviews. After receiving ethics approval in February 2016 through Lakehead University’s Research Ethics Board (REB), I followed up with some amended changes for data collection. I submitted an amendment to my original proposal for approval from Lakehead’s REB. The amendment included collecting data via Google Docs (instead of in-person group sessions) and one-on-one interviews. Once the amended REB proposal was approved in March 2016, I started recruiting for the research. I reached out to find straight-identified educators who are engaged in anti-homophobia/LGBTQ+ equity activism in K–12 schools throughout Ontario, using social media (Facebook), email, and personal contacts. I recruited from Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) leaders and equity officers in school boards across Ontario as well as educators from my personal and professional networks. Some were connected to me through friends or acquaintances, whereas others were not. For example, Lucy⁸ heard about the research through a Toronto-based, social justice-oriented group for parents on Facebook. Additional participants were invited using snowball sampling, which is a useful technique for finding members of particular populations that are difficult to access (Lichtman, 2010). Although I asked my initial contacts to identify

⁷ The Google Doc was originally conceived of as an opportunity for participants to share and collaborate, I will discuss later how and why this changed.

⁸ All participant names are pseudonyms.

other potential participants who met the research inclusion criteria through their professional and personal networks⁹, most of the participants came from the initial recruitment emails and Facebook call for participants. Indeed, I received messages from over 40 individuals in the first three hours of having posted the call for participants on Facebook. By approaching certain groups of people and having friends share (via social media and email) particular groups of people, I employed comprehensive or criterion-based sampling, a form of purposeful sampling to recruit participants (Creswell, 2012; 2013; Savin-Baden & Major-Howell, 2013).

After potential participants made their initial contact with me through email or Facebook, I sent each of them a letter of information and the consent form. I sent participants a link to a 14-minute YouTube video introducing myself and sharing my story of *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* (Appendix C) once I received their signed consent form. In the video, I described the impact the experience had on me as an ally and an academic. After viewing the video, participants were asked to respond anonymously in writing (four participants did not complete this task) to questions in a shared Google Doc¹⁰. I encouraged the participants who did not complete this task to return to the document at any time and contribute. Appendix D outlines the proposed and finalized interview questions.

After watching the introductory video and completing the Google Doc, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants. During the interviews, I invited participants to share their ally stories that were meaningful to them, especially their bad stories (if they had them) where their allyship was challenged. I also asked questions about their motivations for participation in my research study and the

⁹ Participant Consent Form and Letter of Information can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively.

¹⁰ The four questions/prompts are: (1) Please share your successful ally moments; (2) Share your less-than-successful or troubling moments as an ally; (3) What are the limitations of the anti-homophobia initiatives in your school or board? (4) Have I missed something? Is there anything else you want to comment on?

greatest related challenges or limitations in their school contexts. At the end of the interviews, participants had the opportunity to share anything or ask any question they wanted. This final question elicited stories and questions which added more detail to the data. The interviews occurred between March and June 2016 and were audio/video recorded using QuickTime media player. I also took notes during the interviews, which was particularly useful for Kelly's interview because there was a recording error¹¹.

Participants. In total, 16 individuals from Ontario participated in the study: six from Northern Ontario (districts of Sudbury, Thunder Bay, and Greenstone [Longlac, Geraldton]); two from Toronto; four from the Greater Toronto Area; one from Ottawa; and three from Central Ontario (Peterborough, Durham Region). Of the 40 individuals who responded to the initial call for participants, 33 contacted me to follow-up, 20 returned signed informed consent forms, and 16 contributed to this research. Two follow-up reminders were sent to individuals inviting them to participate in the research. Three people who initially made contact did not qualify because they either worked in a private school (2 individuals) or did not identify as straight (1 individual). There were four prospective participants who returned consent forms, but did not participate in the study.

The participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years. Their experiences varied from two years teaching experience to more than 25 years of experience. Of the 16 participants, 2 are vice principals (both elementary level), one is a Student Support Personnel (SSP)¹², 2 are occasional teachers (OTs), and the remaining 11 are full-time classroom teachers (3 elementary and 8 secondary). Finally, 5 out of the 16 participants had a personal connection to me outside of the research project.

¹¹ Kelly approved all the sections written about her (based on my notes) that were included in this dissertation.

¹² Also known as either an Educational Assistant (EA) or a Teachers' Assistant (TA), these educational professionals support students with individual education plans and/or other unique learning needs in the classroom and/or school environment.

My experiences and self-reflections are important components of this research. In fact, it is work I started years ago before I even considered pursuing doctoral studies. Telling and re-telling my bad ally story, *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*, is an important moment in my allyship—just as important and, in some ways, more important than the first GSA event I led. As allies, we tend to tell our good stories, those moments in time where we feel like we have “made a difference.” I have learned that sometimes telling bad stories is important and perhaps more important than those good stories, for reflecting on one’s development as an ally. This research could not exist without my experiences as an ally, good and bad.

Analyzing the data. Interviews were transcribed on an on-going basis throughout the data collection phase and beyond. I employed descriptive coding and thematic analysis (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013). As is common with qualitative research, I began to notice interesting and meaningful passages in the data in the transcription phase (Creswell, 2012; 2013). After all interviews were transcribed, I used ATLAS.ti software to engage in computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. All transcripts and the Google Doc were uploaded to ATLAS.ti for coding. Friese (2014) suggests an approach to analyzing data in qualitative research that she calls noticing things, collecting things, and thinking things (NCT). Noticing things refers, as Friese indicates, to “finding interesting things when reading through transcripts, field notes, documents” (p. 13). At this point, finding interesting points in the data, marking, and naming them are the key focus. The collecting things process involves identifying connections amongst pieces of data, perhaps even applying the same or a similar code. Data with conceptual connections can be linked through codes. The author emphasizes that “NCT analysis does not prescribe any particular way of coding” and is dependent upon the “research question, aim, and overall methodology” (p. 15). The thinking phase emphasizes the continued intellectual engagement required when analyzing data including coding, creating code groups, and identifying patterns and

relationships amongst codes. Qualitative researchers using an NCT approach move back and forth among these states of activity. This process is called a “recursive” approach to data analysis (p. 15). In coding the data for analysis, I started with a descriptive-level of analysis drawing out patterns from the data. In this phase, I read the data and started to draft preliminary codes as I noticed important things. Aligned with Friese’s (2104) approach, I created a list of codes trying to “describe everything that is in the data, naming it and trying to make sense of it in terms of similarities and differences” (p. 17). Describing everything means immersing oneself in the data. After working with the data from “the inside out,” I shifted into conceptual-level analysis, looking at the data from the perspective of the research question, creating queries, and making connections (p. 17). Instead of writing memos and queries within ATLAS.ti to analyze and interpret the data, I created a notation in my own notebook outside of the software. Friese suggests ATLAS.ti is especially useful as a data management tool for “self-reflective” methodologies like narrative inquiry. I opted to use ATLAS.ti in this way because it is user-friendly as a storehouse for data and allows for concurrent styles of data analysis. During conceptual analysis, I refined the unorganized code list into 10 code groups. All codes remained intact, but were now linked or grouped according to what they had in common. Examples of code groups and their titles include allyship, classroom/curriculum initiatives, and experiences of oppression. Individual codes became part of a code group based on their relationship to one another. The title code for a code group was assigned a colour code (as a helpful visual cue) and summarized the connection amongst the individual codes within that code group. For example, transphobia and homophobia were a frequent preliminary code from the descriptive-level of analysis and were connected via a parent-code during the conceptual analysis (with consideration to the research question). In this particular example, the parent code was “experiences of oppression” (exp of opp). The final code shifted from the less-descriptive preliminary code “transphobia” and “homophobia” to “exp of opp_transphobia” and “exp of

opp_homophobia”. See Appendix E for the code groups and codes. I used the code groups to establish the key themes in the research which guide the manuscripts that follow. For example, the code group classroom/curriculum initiatives (and the codes associated with that group) are a major component of Chapter 5.

Summary of changes from proposal to dissertation. This research changed from the proposal stage to the writing of the dissertation. I account for these changes here as well as provide a rationale for them. I initially proposed to collect data by travelling to a few sites in the province (Toronto, Ottawa, Thunder Bay) where I would gather local participants and host a collaborative session for data collection. Further, I proposed holding an online session for those participants who could not participate in person. However, I decided that organizing teacher rendezvous for multiple participants, outside of school hours, and in 3 different locations (2 in which I did not live) could prove logistically challenging. To overcome these challenges, I devised a plan for communicating with each participant by recreating a sharing environment in a web-based platform that all participants could access at their convenience prior to being interviewed. I opted to host the asynchronous group sessions online (instead of in-person group meetings in various locations) to better accommodate the busy schedules of the participants. It required less of their personal time and meant that I could meet them at their convenience instead of trying to convene a group of busy individuals outside of school time. The participants preferred this arrangement over the initial one, as some were on maternity leave, had heavy teaching loads, and others were attending graduate school. In the Google Doc, I asked the participants to respond to some questions that would prompt them to consider some of the key concepts of the research. To achieve this, I created a video (see link in Appendix D) where I introduced myself, told my story, and explained the research process. Once participants watched

the video, they were directed to the anonymous Google Doc to answer questions. Some participants did not watch the video or answer questions and moved right into the one-on-one interview. After completing this stage of data collection, participants emailed me so I could schedule interviews.

I wanted participants to watch the video, which included information about the research process and meant that all participants heard the same instructions and stories in the same way. My intention for using a Google Doc throughout the research process was to provide an opportunity for iterative and emergent data and an open line of communication amongst all participants and the researcher. Although an open line of communication was my intention and goal, the Google Doc was not really used by participants in that way. They did not interact with each other and opted to communicate with me via email instead. For my part, I could have invited participants to return to the Google Doc after their interviews and could have also posted follow-up comments on the Google Doc for participants to respond. I cannot help but feel like the structure of the document appeared similar to a worksheet that, for example, teachers might provide to their students to fill out and submit to me. I cannot say for certain, but I think that participants felt like the Google Doc was there to be filled out and then it was complete. What the Google Doc did provide for me, even if I could not associate certain answers with participants, was an introductory sense of the kinds of topics that might come up in the interviews as well as experiences participants might draw on. Participants' responses included concepts and ideas that I did not specifically inquire about, for example, the updated Health and Physical Education curriculum. Two participants reflected on some of the written responses (theirs and others) in the interview. Because of the anonymized nature of the Google Doc, the document history does not provide insight into which participant wrote what because they are all referred to as "Anonymous user."

Despite prompts to do so, some participants opted to move into the interview citing that their schedule meant they did not prioritize the video and/or Google Doc. Another potential factor to consider is what Clark (2008) refers to as research fatigue, “when individuals become tired of engaging with research” and limit their participation or stop altogether (p. 956). As a former K–12 teacher, I understand all-too-well the rigorous expectations and time requirements of the profession, and, so, as a researcher, I was cautious, even in the planning stages, about my research representing another demand on their time. The design of this research (including the amendment to use Google Docs instead of in-person meetings) was constructed to be accommodating to attract and retain participants. The participants in this research were generous with their time, and, given the response on the Google Doc, they prioritized the interview over online collaboration. I could have more actively prompted them to write more on the Google Doc; however, it seemed like the participants were treating the document as a task to complete and move on from, and I did not want to risk losing participants as a result of research fatigue.

Some may say that the introductory video could have lead participants into certain kinds of responses. The intention of the introductory video was to introduce myself to all of the participants, most of whom were not located in my community. I aimed to not be a faceless researcher to whom they had no connection. I wanted to build a rapport with participants and I envisioned this video like I would an in-person introduction to a meeting or workshop. Added to that, some allies have a reluctance in telling their bad (but, pedagogically fruitful) stories and I hoped sharing my own story would create the space for others to feel comfortable and in the retelling of their story and open the door to more self-reflection about the richness of these learning moments. The two participants who disclosed they did not watch the video were people known to me before the data collection process. While I cannot know their reasons for not watching the video, I can surmise. Because it was called an “introductory video” and

they already knew me, they did not feel they needed to watch it. Another possible reason is the demanding and hectic schedule of educators.

Manuscript-style dissertation. During the final stages of data collection and transcription, I started to ponder the possibility of presenting my research differently than I had originally proposed. In conversation with committee members and my supervisor, I entertained, and, ultimately, decided upon, generating a manuscript-style dissertation where discrete sections would serve as independent documents. The possibilities for research dissemination amongst practitioner communities, the expedience of focusing on publishable manuscripts, and the contributions to scholarly work in this growing field of research were my primary motivators in making this decision.

As such, the conventional findings, discussion, and concluding chapters now take the form of three manuscripts and a conclusion. The first manuscript (which follows this chapter) focuses on the importance for allies to address their own straight privilege, their bad stories of allyship, and the ways that relationships with colleagues and fears related to job insecurity impact them as allies. It follows the editorial style and expectations of the journal, *Studying Teacher Education*. The second manuscript, which is Chapter 5, highlights the nature of allyship and pedagogical approaches in schools and classrooms in Ontario. It adheres to the editorial style and expectations of the *Canadian Journal of Education*. The third manuscript, Chapter 6 aims attention at the ways in which allyship as a concept and role can be transformed to focus not only on oppression, but on privilege. It complies with the editorial guidelines for the *Journal of LGBT Youth*. The concluding chapter offers final reflections and next steps.

Each manuscript contains a brief review of literature that is most relevant to its focus. There are instances of content overlap and/or repetition which will be necessary to communicate the content properly. Ultimately, these manuscripts will be published in distinct journals and, therefore, would be

incomplete without the overlapping theoretical information. I have summarized all the relevant literature for the entire dissertation in the review of literature that precedes this chapter. I have not amended it there because I want readers to see the entire literature that informed this research. A reference list for each manuscript can be found at the end of each paper, as it would be in a published form. I have also included a reference list at the end of the dissertation, which reflects all the literature and works cited in the entire dissertation.

Summary

Narrative inquiry and the storying of participant experiences guided my research. As a methodological approach, it is well-suited for this research because of the capacity for narrative and story-telling to provide information about participants and their lived experiences. Some scholars point to the political nature of narrative research (Barone, 2009), while others highlight its suitability for research in educational settings (Hamilton et al., 2008; Xu & Connelly, 2010). Others still highlight the way that narrative research can access information that might otherwise be difficult to access, for example, prejudice (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013).

After recruiting straight ally teacher participants, using a purposeful sampling technique, I employed two methods of collecting data, a Google Doc and an interview¹³. Despite having different ideas about how the Google Doc portion of the research would unfold (vision and reality do not always meet), the Google Doc nevertheless helped me to explore the experiences of straight ally teachers in a preliminary way and gave me a sense of some of the thoughts and experiences of the participants for the interview process. ATLAS.ti software created a useful data management system to help me code and analyze the data collected. The reporting of

¹³ Please see Appendix C for the questions posed in the Google Doc and Appendix D for finalized interview questions.

research findings follows a manuscript format that includes three chapters which elucidate distinct elements of straight teacher ally experiences. The first article is a summary of the ways that allies negotiate their straight privilege amongst colleagues, fears of job insecurity, and their own bad stories of allyship. These bad stories are actually rich and engaging experiences of growth, but too often are hidden from public telling for fear of the stigma associated with them. Perhaps the inciting incident of these stories are bad, what makes their potential worse is hiding these stories from retelling for fear of shame. In the re-telling the full richness of these bad stories comes to the fore. By emphasizing what is pedagogically enriching about these stories, my aim is to debunk the false dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Calling these enriching experiences bad stories is a way to understand experiences as multilayered with many possibilities for interpretation, self-reflection, and ultimately, learning. The second article (Chapter 6) explores ally approaches to queering the curriculum and their schools. The third article emphasizes the importance for allies of addressing privilege.

For submission to: *Studying Teacher Education* (APA format, 9000-word limit)

Chapter 4: To Stir the Pot, or Not?:

Straight Teachers Navigating Allyship in Ontario Schools

Abstract

Allies can be a link to power for marginalized people, particularly marginalized students. Productive and engaging allies take on more demands on their time and energy in their professional lives for the benefit of their students, often with little institutional training and support. However, allies cannot forge a successful connection with disempowered students without first acknowledging their own privilege. Leveraging straight privilege to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights is of critical importance, however fraught with tension the role of ally/advocate may be. In this paper, I elucidate some of the ways that straightness exists covertly in schools through the stories—in particular what I frame as the “bad” stories of allyship—and experiences of straight teacher allies. These stories are not only limited to curriculum, but also to relationships with colleagues and fears about job security. I showcase these narratives to demonstrate ways in which allies may not be consistent in their support for the marginalized youth with whom they work.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ allies; heterosexism; heteronormativity; privilege

Introduction

Schools are microcosms, institutions that reproduce and reflect and reproduce the norms and values of society-at-large (Wotherspoon, 2004). Foucault (1978) argues that all spaces (public and private) are guided and informed by relations of power (the way that power exists and is exercised in relation to others). Building on Foucault, Delpit (1988) argues that relations of power govern institutions such as schools and that teacher allies have particular access to power by virtue of the authority assigned

to them by the institution. This becomes increasingly complex when factors like gender, sexuality, class, and race are taken into consideration (McCall, 2005). In other words, straight, white teachers will have greater access to power based on their sexuality, race, and institutional position. Teachers, Delpit (1998) suggests, can “agitate for change—pushing gatekeepers to open their doors to a variety of styles and codes” (p. 292). In this paper, straight teachers discuss their actions as allies for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) students, including their bad stories of allyship. This is especially important given the fact that homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity continue to dominate in everyday school life, all three of which regulate how straightness is performed, protected, and valorized (GLSEN, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2015; Yep, 2002). Through this discussion of the factors that influence and affect straight teacher allies and their advocacy, I aim to shed light on the complexity of ally experiences through the so-called bad stories of allyship. I showcase these narratives to demonstrate ways in which allies are not consistently effective supporters for the marginalized youth with whom they work. For, if allies are positioned as heroes, LGBTQ+ students remain targets, victims, and martyrs (Rofes, 2004).

Review of Literature

Anti-oppressive education is rooted in the notion that all forms of oppression are linked (Kumashiro 2000; 2002; 2004). Teachers can resist oppression to create safer learning environments for all students. Kumashiro’s (2000) anti-oppressive pedagogy provides a mechanism for confronting heteronormativity, specifically, in schools and classrooms. It suggests a platform for educators who seek to end discrimination in all its many forms and intersections—including, but not limited to, sexism/heterosexism, racism, classism, and ableism—within their classrooms and schools. Being able to name oppression is a first critical step in the process, and it requires seeing inequity and/or relations of power playing out in a systematically disadvantageous way for individuals or groups in a school or

classroom. Kumashiro emphasizes the importance of intersectionality (Kumashiro, 2002). Addressing oppressions in an intersectional way means educators should confront all forms of oppression (sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and heterosexism) simultaneously and together. Changing oppressive dynamics rooted in these power inequities requires what Kumashiro (2004) calls *disruptive knowledge* not as an end, but rather as “a means toward the always-shifting end/goal of learning more” (p. 34).

Anti-oppressive pedagogy provides a way for teachers to work against oppression in their classrooms. I liken the concept of disruptive knowledge to what I refer in this paper as a “bad” story of allyship. I frame these pedagogically rich stories as bad stories because of their disruptive potential in the lives of allies. They are often the kinds of stories that allies would rather not tell for fear that they will invite criticism or because they feel shame about them. In bringing bad stories to the fore, I highlight their enriching potential rather than entrench the false dichotomy that exists between good and bad.

Delpit (1988) posits that, within schools, a culture of power exists that benefits dominant groups to the detriment of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ students and/or racialized students. In line with Foucault’s (1978) work on relations of power, Delpit (1988) argues that power is enacted in classrooms, establishing rules for participants that reflect the culture of the dominant, most powerful group. For the less powerful, learning the rules of the dominant culture could help marginalized individuals to acquire power, but this does nothing to erode the existing systems. This lesson, I argue, is also applicable to those wishing to understand sexual and gender diversity in schools. Teachers who choose to agitate for change, Delpit reminds readers, must accept a complete reworking of the current culture in schools—from which they themselves benefit. Such a reworking could take the form of decolonizing schools or creating anti-oppressive schools which involve, among other things, questioning privilege (Battiste, 2013; Kumashiro, 2004). This paper shows the challenges associated with that

reworking, including potentially strained relationships with colleagues or limited (perceived or otherwise) career opportunities.

Yep (2002) outlines the violent impact of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity on everyday life for LGBTQ+ students. Like other scholars critical of the dominance of heterosexuality (see Fischer, 2013; Martino, 1999; Meyer, 2007; Pinar & Rodriguez, 2007), Yep (2002) explains that heteronormativity is powerful because of its “invisibility disguised as ‘natural’, ‘normal’, ‘universal’ – its ‘it-goes-without-saying’ character” (p. 168). Heterosexuality maintains its hegemony in schools as long as it remains uncontested and unquestioned (Ingraham & Saunders, 2016). Finley (2011) argues that heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy (heterosexual and male dominance) are key features of a colonized society. Put differently, the normalization of straightness and male dominance are joint forces under colonization. Heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy are key areas of focus to challenge colonialism. Finley (2011) and Barker (2017) demonstrate how queer politics and anti-colonial (decolonizing) movements are rooted in resistance to intersectional oppressions which also exist within schools. Often, the leaders of social change in schools are students and teaching staff and not the formalized leadership of administrators (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2014). Griffin and Ouellett (2002) contend that institutional leaders and policies should guide these social changes. Many LGBTQ+ youth and adults work towards greater equity in schools as part of GSAs or on administrative or policy-developing committees (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Ngo, 2003; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). There are also many straight-identified staff and student allies who participate in GSAs (Eichler, 2010; GLSEN, 2011; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2014; Russell, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011).

Short (2013) challenges people outside schools to assume responsibility and shift heteronormative culture, emphasizing that teachers and principals alone should not be responsible for

creating this change. I think that allies occupy space in social movements in a multiplicity of contexts. Like Short (2014), I think this work should not rest solely on the shoulders of teachers. Pressure for systemic change from within social institutions, like schools, will benefit from external pressure, policy, and leadership. What follows is a presentation of straight teacher ally experiences (and ideas) about allyship in schools. They shed light on their experiences in schools and within some of their stories demonstrate the queer work being done in their schools and also what some of them think needs to be done to continue pushing the boundaries of normalized heterosexuality in schools.

Research Design and Methods

This research, guided by narrative inquiry, focuses on the storying of participants' experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and is well-positioned for researchers who have an explicit political agenda for social change. Barone (2009) highlights the reader of the research (or the audience) as occupying a space with the greatest potential to make change. Put differently, by reading narrative written with an agenda for political change, readers (as much as researchers and participants) become part of the change-making potential of the research. According to Hamilton, Bulloch and Pinnegar (2008), narrative inquiry can track the process, experience, and progress of educational experiences through telling and writing narrative.

Participants. The 16 participants in my study are from various regions across Ontario: 6 participants are from Northern Ontario (districts of Sudbury, Thunder Bay, and Greenstone [Longlac, Geraldton]); 2 are from Toronto; 4 are from the Greater Toronto Area; 1 is from Ottawa; and 3 are from Central Ontario (Peterborough, Durham Region). Participants range in age from 25 to 60 years. Their teaching and ally experiences are varied, some with two years' teaching experience and other with more than 25 years' experience. Of the 16 participants, two are vice principals (both elementary level), one is

a Student Support Personnel (SSP),¹⁴ 2 are occasional teachers (OTs), and the remaining 11 are full-time classroom teachers (3 elementary and 8 secondary). All the participants identify as straight and cisgender (males who identify as men, females who identify as women) and all but one identify as white.

Early on in my research process, participants viewed a video (14 minutes in length) to introduce myself and contextualize the research. I wanted to generate a comfortable, sharing environment amongst the research participants, so in addition to a general introduction, I also told the story of *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*. After watching the video, participants answered four questions¹⁵ in an anonymized, web-based document via Google Docs saved via a cloud service (Google Drive). Their responses helped to give me a sense of the participants' ideas and experiences in preparation for the interview phase of data collection. The participant responses are multi-faceted: optimistic, self-critical, challenge the school system, and critique parent groups/school administration. There are limits to this study namely, the lack of diversity amongst the straight participant group. In addition to identifying as straight (a requirement for participation), all the allies in this research are cisgender and able-bodied, almost all are white, and the majority are middle-class and live in urban centres. Given the lack of diversity in the social location of the participants, the data is limited to a narrower set of life experiences.

¹⁴ Also known as an Educational Assistant (EA), or a Teachers' Assistant (TA), these educational professionals support students with individual education plans and/or other unique learning needs in the classroom and/or school environment.

¹⁵ The four questions/prompts are: (1) Please share your successful ally moments; (2) Share your less-than-successful or troubling moments as an ally; (3) What are the limitations of the anti-homophobia initiatives in your school or board? (4) Have I missed something? Is there anything else you want to comment on?

Results

In Margaret's (2010) study of settler-Indigenous allyship, she claims that being an ally is "a practice and a process – not an identity. It is an on-going practice that is learned and developed through experience" (p. 12). Being an ally is meaningless as a concept if it is not put into practice (Margaret, 2010). Key qualities of allies include courage and endurance, or what Margaret understands as "messing up, learning, picking up and keeping on" (p. 12). Huelskamp (2014) also describes a process of stumbling through allyship. I explore the way participants move through the messiness of ally experiences first through their successful moments and then troubling moments as allies. Then I move into their fears about the impact allyship will have on their job security, relationships with colleagues, and, finally, their bad stories of allyship.

Successful moments. Participants identified the following experiences as their successful moments of allyship: activities or events where the whole school population were invited to participate, such as Day of Pink; extra-curricular activities like theatre productions to educate on queer issues (i.e., The Laramie Project, guest speakers); addressing homophobic language, for example, "That's so gay!"; a sense of making a difference. One participant wrote, "I'm happiest with my day-to-day work, challenging the words and actions of students in a supportive manner and always intervening when I hear anything homophobic or oppressive, positively, through an education stance." I attend to the successful moments briefly here because, although they are important, the success of allies can be overemphasized and overrepresented. Instead, I chose to focus greater attention on the troubling moments of allyship, since they reveal some of the tensions and challenges that come with the role. Although challenging student beliefs is often part of an anti-oppressive pedagogy, it is (or should be) part of a complement of strategies, not the only one (Kumashiro, 2004).

Troubling moments. Homophobic parents, overly-cautious administrators, and their own stumbles as allies are sources of great concern for participants. One participant shared how her students' sexism and homophobia perturbed her. These situations, she writes,

Made me start to really dislike the kids in question because I felt they were also disrespecting me as a woman and that they were laughing at me behind my back. I connected with the gay teachers, who were generous enough to be open and vulnerable about their identities, only to be mocked by a group of students I had taught and known from the time they were in Kindergarten.

It hurt me that none of my lessons over the years about kindness and equity had sunk in.

For another participant, recognizing one's capacity to work effectively as an ally was evident in an observation that, "I have had to come to terms with the limits of my own understanding of the issues affecting trans students." Working in a school where a large part of the student body came from conservatively religious families, another participant shared:

Working alongside a queer colleague, I did a lot of anti-homophobia work. However, we received a fair bit of pushback from parents and the admin. Constantly, I was told by the VP that it wasn't "in their culture" to accept (let alone celebrate) the LGBTQ+ experience. Many students didn't show up (or were pulled out by parents) on our workshop day. It was difficult and frustrating because my work as an ally intersected with all kinds of other issues of race, religion, culture, etc. It was tough to navigate my own privilege in that environment, while still pushing for a more inclusive school for the LGBTQ+ population.

An element of this response that is troubling is the way the participant presents the tension between conservative religious forces (perceived or otherwise) and anti-homophobia education. There are ways to navigate these tensions in a collaborative way with community groups, such as working with mentors

and/or leaders within the community. However, the language the participant uses here does seem less collaborative and more divisive.

In terms of overall impact of their allyship and the capacity to assist students in making life-long changes to their behaviour, one participant pondered, “I’m troubled that I’m only changing local [classroom] behaviours and not changing minds.” And, the concerns stem beyond students for this study’s participants, as is revealed in the following quote: “sometimes I’m afraid to challenge ‘macho’ behaviour in the schools that I work in ... I’m not proud of it and I’m especially unlikely to speak up around older colleagues.” Many of these statements are resonant with my own experiences of both personal failure to challenge colleagues’ language or assumptions and unexpressed distaste for students’ homophobic or sexist stances (Potvin, 2011). The discourse of professionalism is relevant to participants (Meyer, 2007) and lack of teacher training regarding challenging heterosexism in schools (Ngo, 2003).

One participant candidly shared their thoughts about a personal behaviour that they found very difficult to reconcile with their stance as an ally, and one that many people would find troubling and shocking:

Something that troubles me is the choice of words or jokes I’ll make that don’t align with my values and beliefs. I think a lot of it comes from years of calling everything “gay” in the place of lame, stupid, boring as a teen and pre-teen. Even recently, I’ve found myself using the term “faggot” which is to reference a person who is behaving like a terrible human being.

This response is shocking to uncover because I assumed that if a person identified as an ally enough to participate in a study about allyship in schools, then the participant group would not include people who actively use homophobic language. As such, I present this quotation not as exemplary ally behaviour, but, rather, as a need for continued reflexivity for the participant and, hopefully, behavioural changes. This participant’s story highlights the complexity of experiences for ally people and reinforces calls

from marginalized groups for allies to consider their privilege before self-identifying as an ally, and significantly probes the limitations of simply self-identifying as an ally.

Limits and challenges for allies in schools. Participants in the shared Google Doc were invited to comment on their perspectives about limits and challenges for them in their school or school board contexts. One participant wrote a list of challenges for anti-homophobia work, falling into three categories:

- (1) Staff who are uncomfortable with the topic and do not participate in events or teach through an inclusive lens on a daily basis
- (2) Families of students who are unsupportive
- (3) Administration/senior management who might not know how to be supportive or are scared of this work. We have a lot to support this work - legislation, the new HPE curriculum, human rights code, etc. - but without strong support and follow through (maybe an accountability officer?), then I'm not sure how we ensure that initiatives are supported and therefore successful on a deep level.

One participant in this study (a teacher) struggled with their principal over the age-appropriateness of a documentary film, *Sticks and Stones*, which included words like “faggot” that they wanted to screen at their elementary school. The participant reached out to the queer parent community:

I asked if she minded being my go-to gay mom with questions like this and she said, no, that she liked it. She said she would watch the film and share her thoughts. I feel like as long as what we are learning is written in the curriculum then we should feel justified and supported in teaching it.

The fourth and final question in the shared Google Doc gave the participants the opportunity to add anything that they wished. The complexity and diversity of responses from participants helped provide some initial insight into the extent of the participants' knowledge about allyship.

Interviews: Sharing our Stories

Storying experiences is an important part of narrative inquiry research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Xu & Connelly, 2010). The interviews with participants often took on a conversational quality, where there was a free flow of conversation. Participants shared stories and experiences that resonated with my own and offered others that were divergent. Much of the conversations focused on the stumbling and messing up in ally experiences and the implications for participants' professional lives (Margaret, 2010; Meyer, 2007; Huelskamp, 2014). Some of the major points of connection amongst the participants and I were conversations about fears related to job security, relationships with colleagues, and their so-called bad stories of allyship.

Job (In)security. Some participants in this study, namely, Andrew, Emily, and Trueman, are less experienced teachers and/or experienced teachers who do not have permanent, secure teaching positions (see Figure 1). Job insecurity for teachers is increasingly common in Ontario despite the perception that teaching is a secure, stable profession where, as the saying goes, "once you're in, you're in." Participants fear professional repercussions for their activism and allyship. These repercussions include social isolation from colleagues and not being hired into occasional positions, other contract positions, or promotion. Fear of professional backlash speaks to the culture of conformity that can exist in teaching and schools; that is, the presence of fear underscores the notion that blending in is more important than standing out, even if blending in means failing to stand up for an important human rights issue (Seidman, 1994). Kumashiro (2004) asserts that schools deal with oppression every day and that, although "doing nothing" is a way of addressing oppression, the method is not a good one.

Name	Age/ yrs. of experience	Gender/Sexuality/Ethnicity	Geographic location/classification
Andrew	Mid 30s/10 years	Cis/man/Straight/white	Northern Ontario/urban
Cameron	Late 50s/30 years	Cis/man/straight/white	Southern Ontario/urban
Carrie	Mid 50s/20 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Northern Ontario/urban
Dave	Mid 20s/<5 years	Cis/man/straight/Caribbean	Northern Ontario/urban
Elizabeth	Mid 40s/20 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Central Ontario/semi-rural
Emily	Mid 30s/5 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Northern Ontario/rural
Julia	Mid 40s/<10 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Southern Ontario/urban
Jennifer	Late 30s/<10 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Southern Ontario/urban
Lucy	Mid 30s/5 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Southern Ontario/urban
Kelly	Late 30s/15 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Southern Ontario/urban
Madison	Mid 30s/10 years	Cis/woman/straight/white	Southeastern Ontario/urban
Rob	Mid 30s/10 years	Cis/man/straight/white	Central Ontario/semi-rural
Samuel	Early 40s/15 years	Cis/man/straight/white	Northern Ontario/urban
Simon	Mid 60s/25 years	Cis/man/straight/white	Northern Ontario/urban
Stefan	Late 30s/15 years	Cis/man/straight/white	Southern Ontario/urban
Trueman	Mid 20s/<5 years	Cis/man/straight/white	Southwestern Ontario

Figure 1: Participant demographics

Although Andrew is a seasoned teacher with over a decade of work experience in schools and classrooms, he lives in a community where full-time, permanent positions are hard to secure. He is often underemployed for his level of experience and expertise, frequently assuming part-time or occasional contracts. He is also the primary caregiver for his young son. Additionally, he instructs at a post-secondary level while he completes his master's degree in education. He has taught in many different

school contexts with a variety of students and staff complements. In discussing the potential to radicalize or make his allyship more overt, he says:

It is easier to play the role and exist and not ruffle any feathers. It would be more challenging to speak up in situations where I know they [other staff members] don't want to talk about those sorts of things. Or aren't interested in it. So, what makes the change then? If I'm not willing to do so. You know, I think part of it is [if] I had job security I would feel more comfortable creating a stir at work. But, right now, I feel significant pressure to play nice.

An underlying assumption in Andrew's language is the idea that his allyship, his advocacy for queer and trans youth and their human rights, would "create a stir" amongst staff. This speaks to the conservative nature of the environments where he works. The unquestioned rights and privileges that straight, cisgender people (males who identify as men, females who identify as women) are afforded in schools create fear of something perceived as tumultuous and radical when extended to queer and trans youth.

Emily teaches in a more remote, sparsely populated region of Northern Ontario where it is often difficult to attract certified teachers. She herself has returned to her hometown to teach in the regional high school and to raise her young family. She addresses the fact that there is no operating GSA in the regional high school:

I wouldn't say that I would encounter so many barriers, but I would say in order to get anything up and running, it would take a lot of effort and kind of rallying and yeah, just at the time I wasn't able to.

Unlike Andrew, Emily is less concerned about her relationships with colleagues and administration and more concerned about the time it takes to run a GSA. As a new teacher, she is interested in more formal LGBTQ+ equity initiatives but feels she does not have the time to extend her allyship beyond sending queer positive messages in her classroom.

Trueman, a new teacher recently hired into a full-time position in a Catholic school, does not disclose his ally position amongst his colleagues. He says:

at this point, even in all other matters at the school, I try to tread quite lightly. I don't want to be stirring the pot in any way. Basically, I try to do my job well until I'm kind of settled into it. And obviously, parents talk all the time, too, and you develop a certain reputation and I'd like a bit of stability.

In this statement, Trueman articulates his fear, like Andrew, of being a “pot-stirrer.” He is the only participant who does not overtly identify professionally as a straight ally to queer youth in his school or in his classroom. In other words, he is not “out as an ally” in his professional life. His participation in this study comes from his self-identification as an ally to queer people in his personal life. He is also the only teacher in this study who works in a (publicly-funded) Catholic school in Ontario. The stance of Catholic schools in Ontario is a source of much controversy in regard to their interpretation of their religious affiliations including the way they offer protection (or not) for queer and trans youth. Such protection is required by the Ontario Human Rights Commission. The tension between Trueman's values and his desire to conform (to not be a pot-stirrer) is significant. He espouses (or claims to espouse) views that he believes contradict both the values of his school as an institution and the values of many of his colleagues. Trueman also articulates that if someone (likely with more seniority and stability) were to take the lead, he would follow and help run a GSA. But, he does not want to be the first one. Institutional leadership and support for LGBTQ+ equity would help these newer or unstably employed teachers, such as occasional teachers, long term occasional teachers, and those on part-time contracts, understand that these activities are valued, rather than feared or suppressed in Ontario schools (Short, 2013; 2014). In addition to support from leadership within schools, participants also identified their relationships with colleagues as an important component of their own ally work.

Relationships with colleagues. Madison relates her frustration with some of her colleagues and her desire to see more staff in her school educated on LGBTQ+ rights:

I know there are staff - one of my colleagues heard after the Orlando¹⁶ news - she walked into one of her workspaces and a colleague was saying something to the effect ... if they [LGBTQ+ people] weren't so outwardly expressing of their sexuality then this kind of thing wouldn't happen. She wouldn't have disclosed who made the comment in the first place and even if she would, I wouldn't want to know because I couldn't hold myself back from being incredibly rude to that person after.

Despite her connection to other ally staff members, Madison is aware of the homophobia amongst the staff in her school. She expresses frustration over colleagues who possess homophobic values.

More than one participant emphasized the importance of educating and training staff, and this is not exclusive to the study's teachers. As Vice Principal, Stefan would like to see more professional development and staff training in the school where he works:

We just gotta educate staff. Right? And maybe through storytelling. Maybe letting them know, who are these students who are in your building. You know? You have to go beyond them as a student, they're coming to school and their teachers are like "I can't get any work out of the student," but when they come in the office and you have a one-on-one, heart-to-heart with them, this kid [is a mess]. You learn they're a mess, their parents are separating, they feel that they may be ... they're gay and they don't want to tell their parents ... the staff need to know. It's time, they need to know. Those stories were never spoken about. And that has to change.

¹⁶ Madison is referring the massacre that killed 49 people and injured 53 others which took place at a queer nightclub on June 12, 2016 in Orlando, FL.

While this quotation does come close or hint at some of the tropes of LGBTQ+ youth that can be victimizing (Rofes, 2004), Stefan sees one of his roles as a Vice Principal as fostering growth and learning amongst the staff so they can serve their students better. He also identifies the role that staff members can play through peer-to-peer leadership. He continues:

[As a Vice Principal, I] see how teachers teach and [I] see how [their teaching] impacts the kids and one teacher always does equity and inclusivity and I don't have those issues of kids calling each other a fag or anything like that coming out of that class because the [equity] teachings are there. [I can] see the impact. So, that's the other thing, as a teacher, you're kind of insulated to your own teachings. Very rarely can you go see other people teach [like Vice Principals and Principals can].

From his vantage point as a Vice Principal, Stefan can see teachers working successfully for greater equity in their classrooms. In this role, he advocates for teacher to have time and opportunity to learn from their colleagues' best practices. Some teachers in the example Stefan provides are well-versed in LGBTQ+ equity issues, and their advanced learning means these teachers are personally confronting (or in some cases, preventing) bullying and harassment in their classes rather than sending offending students to the Vice Principal. Stefan indicates that he sees the opportunity for teachers (and administrators) to learn from one another, and he helps teachers make those connections as part of his responsibility as an administrator.

Andrew finds himself more often amongst like-minded female colleagues. Within groups of female co-workers, he feels there is greater space afforded for critical conversations about social justice. On the subject of discussions about LGBTQ+ equity in particular, he says:

[they take place] more regularly with female colleagues. There are a few that I can identify in the school. Like I could give you a run-down of this school, there's these two teachers and in this

school, there's this SSP and this teacher who I know will really get it if I start talking about privilege or will enjoy talking with me about those sorts of things. So, there are a few and maybe I'm missing a whole whack of people who would be into talking about that, but I can identify a few and outside of that I don't personally see it happening. At all.

Andrew's observation resonates with the literature on LGBTQ+ allies in Ontario schools. For example, Kitchen and Bellini (2013) identify that the bulk of GSA leaders in their study are straight identified women. Andrew does not discuss sexuality in his example, but he anecdotally reinforces the pattern that more often, women are the vocal public allies who engage in, for example, social justice conversations. This also seems to point to heteropatriarchal influence of male and heterosexual dominance (Finley, 2011). Some of those conversations may involve critically examining homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. Andrew is also intimating that allyship in schools is not always a rosy picture.

Bad stories. I argue elsewhere (Potvin, 2016) that allies have much to learn from their more challenging experiences or bad stories. Too often, allies want to tell the story of the great work they did to positively affect lives; these are what could be called their "good stories." I think, however, that people tend to learn from their stumbling and fumbling throughout allyship (Huelskamp, 2014; Margaret, 2010). In sharing the stories of these mishandled events, allies maintain a sense of humility in their practices. Thus, during the interviews, I intentionally elicited what I called the participants' bad stories. I employ the terms good and bad here cognizant of the fact that both are loaded and complicated words. I purposively use them to toy with normative definitions—to reconsider who defines the value of a story. Deliberately using them raises the critical question, *for whom are certain stories good and/or bad?* Allies (and people with privilege) are often eager to share stories that portray them as benevolent and successful in their social justice activities. At the same time, they are reticent to share stories that might expose ignorance about their unacknowledged privilege. Articulating bad stories highlights how

privilege can covertly operate in schools—even through its more well-intentioned staff and students. While the interviews presented an opportunity for participants to share their own successes (good stories) and struggles (bad stories) as allies, I focus on the latter here. I follow these with a presentation of my own bad story as an ally.

Samuel's story. Some of Samuel's most rewarding moments as an ally occur at the provincial and national conferences for allies where he represents his school and school board. A conference he recently attended (before the interview), however, involved a negative experience over which he felt considerable shame and remorse:

I had a student who I took to a conference last month and I was speaking. I was one of the guest speakers at [the conference] and my topic [focused on how to be an effective ally and what it means to be an ally] It was meant for teachers and there were some students who were in the group and I made the colossal mistake of not giving a trigger warning [because I was going to talk about some sensitive material, like suicide]. And I mentioned about the suicide of a student from our school, [maybe 5 or 6 years ago] and it was the loss of that student that really lit the fire under me to work towards reconciliation with our native students and also bridging the gaps between our queer students and the rest of the school. She was both Anishnaabekwe¹⁷ and lesbian. And she took her own life because of not being accepted by members of the community and her family. I made the colossal mistake of not making that trigger warning known and without reading the crowd and one of my students was at the back of the room and she was her cousin.

The fall-out of this incident involved psychological trauma for the student, including suicidal thoughts. Samuel and the other practitioners at the conference helped the student access counseling support. While

¹⁷ From *Anishnaabe*, which, in English, translates to Ojibwe and female.

of course this action did not erase the severity of the initial mistake, it assisted the student in finding means to cope with the fallout of Samuel's misstep. At the time of our interview, the student had disclosed to Samuel that she was identifying him, to her counsellor, as part of her support network. In other words, a closer student-teacher relationship emerged from this very frightening situation.

Julia's story. Throughout our interview, Julia demonstrated humility and a commitment to growth as an ally. The bad story she recounts took place at a dinner party:

I don't even have the right vocabulary sometimes, like I don't even have the words to say what I want to say, but part of my learning was becoming ok with my ignorance around it and being, admitting uncertainty. I have a friend who is transgender which I didn't realize. I had known her as a woman my whole life, [we've] been close forever. I didn't realize that now she was identifying as a man so *he* in *his* circle of friends is known as he and I didn't realize that. I was making a toast at his birthday and I said "you know she's the most wonderful woman" and the room was just like silent and I was like "oh shit! I didn't know." But making these mistakes and being okay with these mistakes and learning to ... learning that your ignorance is okay as long as you are trying to be reflective and understand.

I relate to Julia's self-reflexive thinking, here; however, it is important to note that the "ignorance" of a privileged, straight ally can have serious consequences for marginalized people. Hopefully, thoughtful reflection leads to more thoughtful actions with less negative impact.

Lucy's story. At the outset of her interview, Lucy recounts a story from the teacher education program she entered after graduate school. In this program, she focused many of her studies on feminist politics and her privileged identity as a white woman. One day, a course instructor had brought in a guest speaker to discuss the significance of the hijab for Muslim women. Most of the students in her class (including herself) were white, except for one female Muslim student. Lucy describes the course as

“sensitivity training for different issues--all the issues that we might encounter in schools.” Her instructor:

brought in an outside group of young Muslim women to [speak to our class]. The first problem [was that] it wasn't laid out what were they there to do. We [the pre-service teachers in the class] thought [the guest speakers were there to] tell us about how to interact with Muslim students and parents. So, [the guest speakers] came in feeling like we hadn't done our research and we shouldn't even ask about veils [because it is] none of our fucking business and [the implication was that we were] a bunch of white teachers [living in a big city, why] don't you know how to deal with this?

In a later class, while the (mostly white) teacher candidates were debriefing the experience, short-sighted opinions (including Lucy's) about hijab-wearing women emerged. Lucy elaborates:

I used to feel sorry for women in veils¹⁸ and not that I would ever say anything, but I kind of agree in the sense that “yeah, I don't understand why a woman ... why a culture would support suppressing women in this way” and so I stood up and I don't remember what I said but I do know there was a Muslim girl who stood up and said “I'm so sick of you white people, shut up, I can't handle this” and I said “well why don't you explain it to us?” and she said “Don't single me out! I'm not a token Muslim here to explain my culture or my religion to you!” and ran out crying. And so, then I immediately was like “no, no! wait! I'm sorry!” ... I just wanted to know how not to do what I did in that moment.

Lucy's story of her experience in her pre-service teacher training program shaped her thinking as a white, straight person. While this example is not about LGBTQ+ issues, it demonstrates how even supportive, well-informed allies can forget their privilege. Lucy went on to say that this experience

¹⁸ A word sometimes used to describe the hijab and niqab.

shapes the way she teaches critical issues in her classroom so that marginalized students feel safe and not centered-out like the student was in her teacher education course.

Emily's story. One of Emily's female students appeared to develop a crush on her in the context of their teacher-student relationship, something Emily felt (understandably) very uncomfortable with, even when recounting it in the interview. This student spent a lot of time in Emily's classroom and started trying to hug her and be physically close to her in ways that made Emily uncomfortable. As a response, Emily connected the student with the school social worker to help educate the student about healthy relationships. She elucidates:

And I know that she did a little bit of writing on it [she] was kind of identifying as bi. Because she did have a boyfriend at one point too, right? So, [she] was just working it out. I don't think that she felt that that part was wrong, but again, I'm not quite sure how she fully grasped the issue and I know that she was still going to see the counselor and working through things and eventually those instances got less and less and less in my classroom so it wasn't that awkward tension happening.

What is most troubling for Emily, even now, is whether it was clear to the student that it was the inappropriateness (and illegality) of potential teacher-student relationships and not the student's sexual orientation that Emily felt discomfort about. In her efforts to help her student understand healthy boundaries and relationships, Emily is still concerned the student may have taken her response as motivated by homophobia.

Trueman's story. Trueman struggles with his commitment to his allyship, a point which is demonstrated in his use of homophobic language:

For some reason my go-to to describe the behaviour [of a person acting like a jerk is to call him] a faggot. And [I]said it with angry conviction. [That's] the only time that word ever comes out

[of my mouth], when someone is behaving like a total asshole. That's [the] word I think suits their behaviour.

As a self-identified ally, Trueman should consider a greater commitment to anti-homophobia, especially in his school and community. Gehl (2004) reminds allies that self-identifying is not enough. Effective and responsible allies need to put their intentions into action. In the interview, which occurred over Skype using video, I expressed my shock at his use of homophobic language. I did not verbalize much in response, but my facial expressions said it all. I encouraged Trueman to think about what motivates him to use inappropriate language and to consider his straight privilege. I suggested that he consider his role as an ally beyond having some gay friends and going to queer night clubs. This was difficult to do as an interviewer because, on account of the voluntary nature of the interview, I did not want to critique Trueman too harshly. I relied on our conversation about straight privilege to begin to unpack his ideas. At the end of our interview, he expressed gratitude at having the opportunity to discuss these experiences and to be able to examine them a little. He also acknowledged that he had never considered his straight privilege before. I tried to use the opportunity to educate Trueman rather than condemn him.

Kelly's story. At the start of her teaching career, Kelly lived with a roommate and friend. During this time, they watched a popular movie with a scene where two friends jokingly refer to each other using homophobic slurs, something Kelly and her friend would re-enact with each other at home. She decided to re-enact these scenes in the staff room at work and to other staff members. Now that Kelly is a committed ally, she says it "makes me cringe to think about it" and "makes me want to puke when I think about it." Kelly hopes that "nobody remembers [me re-enacting these scenes] now that I publicly identify as an ally. I hope people don't remember me that way." She works in school administration, providing leadership and training for staff in the area of LGBTQ+ rights. Kelly uses this example to demonstrate that "without doing work on privilege, it's impossible" to be an ally.

The so-called bad stories participants shared with me in the interviews reflect their learning, which, in some cases, is ongoing. The most difficult part of these stories for the majority of the participants is where they acted in a discriminatory way and/or perpetuated stereotypes. I relay participants' bad stories here to highlight the complexity of ally experiences. In some cases, their stories involve perpetuating homophobia, racism, and/or transphobia. These narratives demonstrate the prominence of heteronormativity and straight, white, cisgender privilege even among well-intentioned allies. A pressure can exist for allies to be perfect and to never make mistakes, as these mistakes can significantly affect the very people someone is seeking to ally themselves with. All of the participants were uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassed to tell their stories. For example, Lucy said she felt uncomfortable to tell it but related to my own story and so she felt more comfortable sharing her own bad story. In fact, it was one of the first things she discussed in her interview. She wanted to "get it out there and over with". Julia referred to herself as "dumb" and the embarrassment she felt when recounting her story. I argue, however, that the discomfort in retelling is a necessary part of the process of acknowledging straight privilege. This recognition is a concrete step toward challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools. I believe, in general, that the participants' discomfort was alleviated by the fact I had told them my own bad story in video format. Lucy and Kelly especially used these stories (and experiences), much like me, as fodder for better allyship. These cringe-worthy and frustrating moments demonstrate some components of allyship that may not be at the core of every conversation about the "good work" that allies do. Nevertheless, they are powerful experiences that shape the way that allies themselves frame their work and in some cases, begin to understand straight privilege and heteronormativity.

My Connection and Reflections

My professional risks. My career began as a high school social sciences teacher. I ran a GSA at the school, was actively involved in school life, and worked on my Master of Education degree while teaching. I recall writing papers and reflecting upon my commitment to LGBTQ+ equity issues and the resistance I faced among students and colleagues. When I sat down to interview my participants for this research, I was three years into my PhD and felt confident in my decision to undergo a doctoral program. I did not anticipate that participants would speak to their fears about job security, but as I heard them—especially Andrew’s—I realized their insecurities resonated with me. Even though I was not conscious of it while I was teaching, I know now that I was concerned that my stance on LGBTQ+ students and allyship would impact my employability and acceptance among other staff. As I reflect, it is hard to measure and/or know if my LGBTQ+ activism made me seem like a desirable employee or a “pot-stirrer.” I certainly felt some of the same sentiments that participants share about fearing negative professional impact of my actions, but I forged ahead anyway. In the end, my K-12 teaching career came to a conclusion because of declining enrolment in the community where I taught. During a period of lay-off, I decided to teach at Lakehead University in the teacher education program and pursue a PhD.

I could relate to Andrew’s story about wanting to toe the line and maintain the status quo, to be liked and accepted socially in the school. I also felt envious because Andrew chose not to be outspoken about his ally stance and in some contexts used his maleness to fit in. As a woman and an outspoken ally, I did not experience the social acceptance that Andrew did. Even dedicated social justice advocates and activists like Andrew and I want to fit in, be accepted, and more practically, be employed.

My bad stories. I have written extensively elsewhere about one of my most powerful bad stories, what I call *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* (Potvin, 2016). I share this story at academic conferences, public talks, in the media, and in the video that participants viewed at the start of their experiences in this research. *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013* involves an instance where my allyship acutely faltered. I tweeted a homophobic tweet over a weekend while I was taking my first doctoral class. While it was not my intention to be prejudiced, the tweet was nevertheless homophobic. Some classmates who followed me on Twitter anonymously notified my supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton, who then checked in with me to discuss this very public transgression and to encourage me to issue an apology for the tweet. I was devastated and frustrated with myself for misrepresenting myself and ultimately, I realized, for forgetting my own straight privilege. Later in the week, after issuing an apology tweet, I publicly apologized in front of all my classmates. This experience is what set me on the path of doing doctoral research on straight teacher allies, privilege, and the complexities of allyship.

The other bad story took place during this research. As I put out the call for participants, I included certain social experiences and identities for people to self-determine their eligibility. Participants are straight-identified educators (teacher, administrator, or student support personnel) currently working in K-12 publicly-funded schools who also identify as an ally to LGBTQ+ people. What is noteworthy is what is missing. I made no mention of gender, an assumption or omission that is problematic. The assumption I made was that all straight people would identify as cisgender. Also, despite acknowledging transphobia in my literature review and using the umbrella term LGBTQ+, I fell flat. Part way through the data collection, when I realized the error I made, I backtracked to confirm that participants identified as cisgender, instead of basing my assumption on our conversations. Some participants articulated in their interviews that they were cisgender, but the assumption that all people

who identify as straight would also identify as cisgender on my part reinforces the argument made by participants, the literature, and myself that cisgender people have a long way to go in terms of allyship towards trans people. This error on my part could go unacknowledged, but it is an important moment to demonstrate how deeply engrained privilege can be—in this case, cisgender privilege.

Conclusion

These shared stories helped create a fuller picture of what it means to be a teacher ally in K-12 schools in Ontario. Using Margaret's (2010) ideas of allyship involving messing up, learning, picking up, and keeping on as well as Huelskamp's (2014) idea of stumbling through allyship, this paper helps extrapolate on the experiences of straight teachers in K-12 schools. This includes their fears of being considered pot-stirrers and troublemakers who are isolated from colleagues and whose professional growth is stunted by their superiors. Participants who seem to bring the most critical or queered pedagogy focus on the role that their own straight privilege plays in their ally role. Bad stories help "disrupt knowledge" (Kumashiro, 2004) of what it means to be an ally and also of what learning as an ally looks like: multi-faceted and fraught with tensions (Seidman, 1994; Pinar, 1998). I urge allies to deepen their commitment to queer school spaces and disrupt the status quo, business-as-usual heterosexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity that festers in schools. To see the lived oppression of LGBTQ+ youth in schools and do nothing is a salient example of straight privilege at work. In other words, it is from a position of luxury that one can choose, or not, to be involved in working to make schools safer, more equitable places. Wells (2007) articulates the impact of the teachers, his "silent tormentors", those who failed speak out and act out against oppression. The toxic silence around gender and sexuality based harassment in schools must be broken and I think that straight allies can be well-situated to do so. Failing to address their own straight privilege or remaining silent for fear of being disliked by their colleagues will limit the positive impact that allies can have. Disrupting homophobic or

heterosexist conversations will likely have a more positive impact than a rainbow sticker on a classroom door. As will leading a staff workshop on straight privilege or giving tools on how to address homophobic bullying in the hallways and classrooms. Supportive principals can help bolster the efforts of teacher allies, even in the absence of supportive principals, teachers can organize amongst themselves in their unions and other professional organizations to create a culture where disrupting oppressive scripts is no longer a fearful act.

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Chapter 5: Straight allies, queer pedagogies?

Ontario teachers explore anti-oppressive and queer education in schools

Abstract

Straight teacher allies comprise a large proportion of those who advocate for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans/Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) rights in Ontario schools. This paper contributes to the ongoing research and literature about the activities of straight teacher allies by outlining the strategies and approaches they use in their classrooms and school communities to confront heteronormativity and heterosexism. Assuming the role of an effective ally presents another demand on K-12 educators, as such schools and school boards should be grateful for the work they assume. The work of straight teacher allies is challenging and complex; yet, they often have little training or institutional support. In this study, I explore both the variety and complexity of approaches used by straight teacher allies to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights in Ontario schools. I argue that queering approaches are more productive than anti-homophobia measures because of the potential of queering approaches to resist and re-envision the status quo. The act of imagining school spaces with room for a multiplicity of identification (queering) is more effective than resisting homophobia without creating space for many different ways of knowing and being.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ allies; queering schools; safe spaces

Introduction: Anti-Homophobic, Anti-Oppressive, and Queering Pedagogies

This paper focuses on research completed to explore the experiences of straight teacher allies working in K-12 schools in Ontario in the spring and summer of 2016. Guided by the primary research

question, *How can straight teacher¹⁹ ally activists move beyond the limits of anti-homophobia education by challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools?*, the purpose of the research is to expand and elaborate on understandings of allies and their experiences as leaders of anti-homophobia initiatives in schools.

An increasingly common way for straight teachers to confront homophobia and transphobia is through LGBTQ+ ally and activism work in schools. Some straight teachers are active supporters of Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs), which are student-led anti-homophobia groups in schools. Others deliver anti-homophobia or queer curriculum and/or organize school-based anti-homophobia events or activities (LaPointe, 2016; Russell, 2011). Activism guided by queer pedagogies serve not only to disrupt homophobia, but also to confront heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Luhmann, 1998). Heteronormativity is the normalization of heterosexual privilege (Driskill, Finley, Gilley, & Morgensen, 2011; Fischer, 2013; Martino, 1999; Rodriguez, 2007) evident in school dances and health/sex education curriculum, among other aspects of school life. Heterosexism presumes the superiority and naturalness of heterosexuality (Finley, 2011; Ingraham & Saunders, 2016; Meyer, 2007; Pinar, 1998; Walton, 2006). These concepts are essential to understand why challenging the hegemony of heterosexuality is important for shifting school culture.

Both heteronormativity and heterosexism are key concepts explored by queer theorists (Ingraham & Saunders, 2016; Pinar, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). The goal of queer theory is to move away from a paradigm where heterosexuality is normalized and homosexuality is marginalized (Luhmann, 1998; Pinar, 1998). Heteronormative assumptions lead to beliefs about homosexuality that deny it the same level of agency as heterosexuality. Homophobia would see its end, Halperin (1997) argues, if this

¹⁹ Throughout this paper, I treat the terms “teacher” and “educator” as synonyms. Participants in my study could be, but are not limited to being, classroom teachers. They may be administrators, teachers, and/or student support personnel (SSPs).

traditional binary of subject (hetero) and object (homo) could be replaced with a broader, systemic queer ideology that dismantles homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. Strategic resistance to homophobia, guided by queer pedagogies, is more effective than ad hoc anti-homophobia efforts because such resistance requires a shift away from heteronormativity (Halperin, 1997; Rasmussen, 2004). Martino (1999) encourages teachers to “move beyond a dominant liberal pedagogy to encourage students to think about what we take for granted as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’” (p. 147). Queer pedagogies provide teachers with models they can examine and then apply to queer politics and content in their classrooms and lesson plans (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Kumashiro, 2002). Teachers with queer pedagogies are often guided by theory that values, alongside deeply reflective teaching practices, a multiplicity of identities and lived experiences.

Central to the process of challenging systemic equity is an acknowledgment of (straight) privilege. Queer Indigenous scholars articulate that straight white privilege and the persistent elevation of straightness and whiteness as identity categories emerge from colonization (Barker, 2017; Driskill et al., 2011; Finley, 2011; Morgensen, 2011). Regan (2006) argues that settler people have a tendency to “deny, silence or minimize the on-going impacts of colonialism” (p. 19). Straight people, I argue, can have similar self-serving tendencies and deny the impact of homophobia and heterosexism. I present anti-homophobia and queering approaches in schools as connected, but distinct, concepts (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Kumashiro, 2004). In the context of this research, anti-homophobia stances resist regressive gender-based oppression. Queer pedagogies also resist those forces but, additionally, re-envision schools as places for multiple perspectives and identities (Goldstein, Russell & Daley, 2007). In this study, participants with a more developed background in critical pedagogies, especially in feminism and anti-racism, tend to extend their ideas of allyship beyond a desire to help or fix the current problems. In other words, participants with a strong critical pedagogical

and anti-oppressive foundation start to engage in a queering of their school context (Kumashiro, 2004). This extension beyond anti-homophobia efforts often involves a re-envisioning of the current curriculum as well as a re-examination of the school context itself. Participants such as Cameron, Julia, Lucy, and Emily also see the nuances of intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991).

Kumashiro (2004) highlights four different approaches of anti-oppressive education. Participants in this study move among those four areas: improving the experiences of oppressed/marginalized students; changing the way people conceive of difference; challenging power and privilege and their social implications in society and schools; and finally, acknowledging and discussing the challenges associated with anti-oppressive education. Anti-homophobia education often focuses on improving the experiences of marginalized and oppressed peoples, whereas queering education/educational contexts involves challenging the structures of power and privilege in society. Both are important parts of a whole; however, they involve different work. Leaving the eradication of prejudice to teachers, principals, and the school system is a grand request that is achievable, but requires the support of other people. Educators can and should be part of the process of challenging straight privilege, but they cannot be the only line of offence.

Research Design and Methods

The research was guided by narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) identify narrative inquiry as a collaborative process that involves “mutual storytelling and re-storying” (p. 4). They identify four stages of narrative inquiry that often overlap and can exist simultaneously for the researcher and participant: living, telling, retelling, and reliving. The experiences that participants gain from living, telling, retelling, and reliving are translated and discussed in an interview experience. Narrative inquiry helps frame this research and the storying of the participants’ experiences. Stories of

experience are more widely accessible to a broader-range of readers and also allows advocates and activists the opportunity to reflect on the political nature of the work they do (Barone, 2009).

Participants in this research study viewed an introductory video (approximately 14 minutes in length) I created to introduce the research and the researcher. After watching the video, participants answered four questions: (1) Please share your successful ally moments; (2) Share your less-than-successful or troubling moments as an ally; (3) What are the limitations of the anti-homophobia initiatives in your school or board? and (4) Have I missed something? Is there anything else you want to comment on? Participants responded to these questions using a shared document created in Google Docs and saved via a cloud service (Google Drive). As the creator of the Google document, I set-up the shared document in a way that would allow people to contribute, but would not share their identities. This process helped to give me a sense of the participants' ideas and experiences before proceeding to the interview in the next phase of data collection. I employed ATLAS.ti to code and organize data for the Google Doc (and the interviews). Using ATLAS.ti as a data management software, I employed notation outside of the software as it was compatible with the self-reflective nature of narrative inquiry as a methodology (Frieze, 2014).

Participants. The 16 participants in this research are from various regions across Ontario: 6 participants are from Northern Ontario (districts of Sudbury, Thunder Bay, and Greenstone [Longlac, Geraldton]); 2 are from Toronto; 4 are from the Greater Toronto Area; 1 is from Ottawa; and 3 are from Central Ontario (Peterborough, Durham Region). Participants range in age from 25 to 60 years. Their teaching and ally experiences are varied, some with 2 years of teaching experience and others with more than 25 years of experience. Of the 16 participants, 2 are vice principals (both elementary level), 1 is a

student support person (SSP),²⁰ 2 are occasional teachers (OTs), and the remaining 11 are full-time classroom teachers (3 elementary and 8 secondary). All the participants identify as straight, cisgender (males who identify as men, females who identify as women), and all but one participant identify as white. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Results

Kumashiro (2002; 2004) suggests that teachers should build instructional strategies atop an anti-oppressive pedagogy. In other words, anti-oppressive pedagogy, in this case queer pedagogies are not add-ons to an otherwise heteronormative curriculum or pedagogical approach. Using self-reflexivity, educators can infuse all curriculum with a queer and anti-oppressive pedagogy by disrupting knowledge (Kumashiro, 2004). I explore this idea through participants' narratives and experiences with Math curriculum, Health and Physical Education curriculum, and in extra-curricular contexts. I arrived at these categories through the responses and experiences of the participants who frequently connected the ideas we were discussing (straight privilege, anti-homophobia, queering curriculum) back to their experiences with the Math curriculum and the Health and Physical Education curriculum. I focus on those here because of their relevance for the participants, but also for educators who may be reluctant to see how anti-oppressive education or queering practices fit in the math curriculum. The Health and Physical Education curriculum was top-of-mind for many participants because of the roll-out of new (and for some, controversial) curriculum which was ongoing during data collection.

²⁰ Also known as an Educational Assistant (EA), or a Teachers' Assistant (TA), these educational professionals support students with individual education plans and/or other unique learning needs in the classroom and/or school environment.

Math curriculum. Simon, a student support professional (SSP) and GSA leader reflects upon the shift in classroom practices he has observed over the last couple of decades. As an SSP, he works one-on-one with students who need learning support in the classroom; he also moves between several classrooms where students require his support, and as such, he observes many classroom teachers in a day. In response to my question about what barriers he thinks exist for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies in schools, he says:

I think there have been some gains in the last 15 years, but there is a lot of work to be done.

Right? For example, the board needs to provide on-going training regarding human rights issues and make the interconnection between several areas. I think they are lacking the interconnection between Indigenous issues, Indigenous education and LGBTQ+ issues. And some other components [such as] why are students not successful in the classroom? If they are not able to make those connections, teachers and staff are not able to move forward. I mean, to receive training of a half hour on Indigenous issues and talk about treaties in 15 minutes, that's crap. It needs to be embedded in the professional development component to such an extent that when you are teaching math you are going to be taking into consideration LGBTQ+ issues. If you are doing quadratics, you don't need to incorporate LGBTQ+ issues, but when you are dealing with word problems, yes you can do that. You are teaching statistics, you can do that. Talking about suicide, how many of them are coming from the LGBTQ+ community. So, it's not going to be difficult, but the [school] boards need to take the lead on that one.

Simon suggests infusing curriculum with queer pedagogy that avoids the trappings of a one-off approach that could compartmentalize or tokenize important social justice issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights. One-off days can be problematic because they fail to authentically integrate queer identities and politics into the mainstream (Yep, 2002). The approach Simon suggests enables teachers of all subjects

to integrate queer content into their lesson planning and activities, while also highlighting the importance of intersectionality (Cho et al., 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Teachers are often required to be mindful of the multiple forms of oppression (and privilege) that exist in classrooms and schools. However, for many people in schools LGBTQ+ students represent a moral issue where homosexuality is viewed as immoral, a perspective that is not applied to Indigenous students or Indigenous studies. What such critics miss or even ignore is that being LGBTQ+ is more than mere homosexuality (which doesn't to the "t" of LGBTQ+ in any case). As it is for straight people, gender and sexuality identity are also about identity, family, relationships, and community (personal communication, Walton 2014).

While Simon suggests it is important to integrate queer content into all subjects, including math, some practitioners identify related obstacles. Madison, a secondary school math teacher and GSA leader in Southeastern Ontario, finds including queer content, let alone a queer pedagogy, in her math classes a challenge. She says the curriculum itself does not elucidate a critical or queer focus:

The [math] curriculum? Not so much. Although I think there was one year where I was showing them graphs that had been published, it was surveys about bullying and the content touched on gender and sexuality and bullying that targeted those. But I wouldn't say I make a point to put it into my curriculum. It would be more like just in terms of the general respect that I expect from students and students in my class. That's how it [anti-homophobia] would come up in my class.

Madison makes a strong critique of the math curriculum, or at least her interpretation of it. If the integration of queer content and pedagogy presents a challenge to Madison and others in her position, I suggest that more curriculum options with stronger leadership should be explored. It is often the case that math (and science) are viewed, frequently by the teachers themselves, as being outside the realm of social justice (Rands, 2009). A queer pedagogy can guide classroom experience, but doing so is left up

to the disposition or pedagogical leanings of the individual teacher. So, while pedagogy is essential to queer schools and to disrupt knowledge, formalizing the curriculum is also crucial.

Similarly, Andrew, a math teacher in Northern Ontario, responds to the notion that it is difficult to integrate queer content into math. He says, “It is a little bit harder. I think it’s mostly a cop out, but I think it is a bit harder.” Andrew is deeply committed to activism, particularly to the environment, labour, race, and gender equity. He relates a story about a significant moment in his math teaching:

So, there’s a bunch of the questions that are—if you look in the textbook—assume a gender binary. So, to make a committee, the committee needs to have this many girls, how many different ways can you have a committee with x number of boys, right? And it assumes a clear gender binary. So anyway, I was super busy one day, I looked through some old files I got from someone else, I just grabbed one and I was like “Okay, I’m going to throw that on the Smartboard, we’re going to do a couple of questions and then we’ll work on it.”

Shortly after delivering the main part of the lesson, he grew uncomfortable and decided to take action. He apologized to the class, acknowledging that he had been in a hurry that day and had grabbed a lesson he had used many times before but which he realized now was problematic. He wanted to acknowledge to his students his awareness that there were more than two genders despite what the math problem presented. He also committed aloud to his students that he would do better next time and not use that kind of problem again. At the end of his class, a student approached him:

I had this student come up to me [who said] “Thank you so much for doing that, I don’t see myself on one end of this binary or another and I really appreciate that [you acknowledged gender exists outside of boy and girl] and I’ve never had another teacher [in] this school who would do that or would have said that.” Which I know wasn’t the case, because I know a bunch of the other teachers [who would have said the same thing], but clearly it had never come up.

[The student said] “Thank you so much, this was so meaningful to me” [they were] just glowing because of this stupid little thing that I had said.

Here, Andrew reflects on what seemed like an insignificant amount of effort. In fact, he feels ashamed for having used such a problem and yet it raised an issue that was so meaningful for student. This student, in Grade 12, had never had a teacher acknowledge that gender exists beyond the traditional binary. Andrew’s simple disclaimer and public acknowledgement was poignant for the student in his class. His acknowledgement demonstrates a deep level of engagement in his practice as a teacher, and, yet, it seems unfortunate that this should be such a revolutionary act for him as an educator and for his student in their scholastic life. This example points to how deeply rooted the dominant gender narrative is in schools and the ways that curriculum expectations can clearly guide teachers.

Andrew and Madison provide insights into the ways that the math curriculum can be queered with deliberate intent, without being labour-intensive. Andrew identifies the ways that heteronormative and cisgender privilege exist unchecked in the math curriculum. Madison and Andrew illustrate how the Math curriculum can be filled with content that reflects gender diversity. LGBTQ+ identities can be integrated into Math and Science curriculum as readily as they can be into Social Sciences and Humanities and Health and Physical Education curriculum (Kumashiro, 2002; Luhmann, 1998; Pinar, 1998). Rands (2009) warns, however, that queering math should not involve an “Add-Queers-And-Stir” (p. 184), but rather one that envisions new possibilities. Andrew’s desire to move beyond the gender binary in his combinatorics class reflects an important step in the right direction, however, Rands (2009) suggests “Mathematical Inqu[ee]ry pushes teachers and students to take the level of interrogation one step further” and to question, for example, conceptions of gender, family, and even, solve problems with variables one may not know (p. 187). Although the Math curriculum currently may not have clearly

articulated anti-homophobic or queer content, the Health and Physical Education curriculum does—a reality that is a source of controversy and top-of-mind for participants.

Health and Physical Education curriculum. The Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum in Ontario was revised in 2010 for the first time since 1998. However, the curriculum was pulled shortly after its release because of the controversy around the sexuality curriculum. It was further revised and published in 2015. Most curriculum subject areas are updated on a 3 to 5-year revision cycle to ensure their relevance²¹. However, the Ontario Ministry of Education policy of curriculum review is process-oriented—which means there is no hard-and-fast rule or timeline for curricula to be updated. Critics of the HPE curriculum (in 2010) suggested that the new curriculum promoted alleged deviant sexual behaviour, pre-marital sex, age inappropriate content, and “gay sex.”²² The so-called controversial pieces of the curriculum exist within the examples used to illustrate the intended learning. For example, in Grade 3, gender identity and sexual orientation are included as examples of “invisible differences.” Other invisible differences include cultural values, skills, and learning abilities. These invisible differences sit in contrast to visible differences, which are outlined in the Grade 3 curriculum as hair colour, height, and eye colour.²³ Teachers, however, are not required to use the examples the curriculum provides. Every participant in this study referenced the 2015 roll-out of the updated HPE curriculum in their interviews without prompting from me. For the majority of participants in this research, backlash from some parent communities was at the forefront of their minds.

Jennifer is an elementary teacher in a relatively large Southern Ontario school board. The school where she teaches has a student population of mostly new Canadian students from South Asian Muslim

²¹ The Ontario Ministry of Education does not hold itself to specific timelines for curriculum review. In practice, it happens every 3 to 5 years, but they emphasize process (not specific timeframes) on their website. See: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/curriculumreview/process.html>

²² http://www.campaignlifecoalition.com/index.php?p=Sex_Ed_Curriculum

²³ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health1to8.pdf>

and Sikh families. She discusses the way she teaches relationships as part of the (now controversial) grade 3 HPE curriculum:

K-8 is teaching the new sex/health unit at the same time. Grade 3, I'm in Grade 3 this year, and it's easy breezy – we're talking about family and what makes a family, like it's – "oh sweet!"

We're about love and feeling safe, okay good.

Before the curriculum update, Jennifer incorporated her anti-homophobic pedagogy into the HPE curriculum. Part of her approach includes teaching about same sex families, something that she thinks some members of the parent community could consider controversial. Because of the new curriculum changes, she can continue to teach the curriculum content in a way that honours and includes LGBTQ+ families with greater institutional support for her approach. She elaborates on her approach to teaching about families in her classroom:

And a big thing that I always did was add photos [to a] photo montage of what makes a family. I would add all these other photos and we'd have a discussion [about] what makes a family. [I'd include] animals and [people] and [different races of people] and [little kids] and big kids and [mix] as many possibilities together in pictures. And have deep rich conversations about family dynamics [for example] who is [a family?], where are the rules written down? who makes them? and is [that] okay?

The staff at the school, including Jennifer, had not received any substantive complaints from parents about the Grade 3 curriculum delivery at the time of our interview. The principal had received a couple of phone calls from the parents, but Jennifer said that upon discussing the changes with the principal, parent concerns were assuaged.

Simon expresses hope that the new HPE curriculum will "start making a difference" and impact school culture:

The new Sex Ed [HPE] curriculum that the Ministry developed is going to be incorporated into the classroom. At all levels. Not just in some units and lessons. I want it to be incorporated at all levels in every part of the curriculum so the teachers are aware of how to deal with those issues when they are coming across. It is not only the obligation of the school social worker or counselor, the guidance people. That is also the obligation of any educator or any other person working in the classroom. We also need training for support staff about LGBTQ+ issues and sensibilities because I have seen, for example, custodians who hear comments in the halls and they are with the kids all the time or in the cafeteria, and they don't intervene because they don't see that it's their duty to intervene or to say something about this issue.

Therefore, despite the potential for this curriculum to be divisive, it could also help create new ways of having conversations about gender and sexuality.

Trueman, a new and inexperienced teacher, teaches full-time at a Francophone Catholic school board in Southern Ontario. He chooses to hide his own beliefs and values about LGBTQ+ equity from administration, colleagues, and students in his school for fear of repercussions. This is a professional move he notes is prudent for him as a young teacher seeking stable, full-time employment in a province with few full-time teaching opportunities. He articulates his view of the HPE curriculum and how it fits into the school where he works:

[It's] a kind of an example of how things [related to LGBTQ+ issues/people] are touchier subjects because really I don't know if you've read it [the HPE curriculum], but I've gone through it and really nothing is offensive, like anybody who was all up in arms was dumb and didn't read it. That's my opinion. But we still have to have like a whole training session about it. They [board officials/administration] told us since the start of the year "Nobody teaches that curriculum until we tell you guys what to do" and "Don't touch it." [Then they said] "Oh well,

the Bishops are still going through it.” So, I guess there’s no sense of urgency there and now they’ve told us to just teach it as we’ve taught it in previous years without approaching the new material. Because it’s ... it’s all taboo. Like, don’t do that.

This example demonstrates the influence that school leadership and policy makers have over the teachers in their schools. New teachers who are concerned about job security may be particularly inclined to maintain the status quo in terms of equity and human rights issues for fear of backlash. If the status quo in schools and classrooms does not honour or uphold equity measures and human rights, then social justice oriented teachers might be stopped in their tracks. In other words, schools should create environments both inside and outside classrooms that strive for equity so as to encourage students and teachers to advocate for human rights. Having noted this, it is worth considering Trueman’s additional comment: “Realistically, I could teach it however I’d like, and I don’t think there’d really be any repercussions, but yeah, still that’s the kind of politics around it.” It is hard to reconcile these two quotations because his actions conform to the directives of the administration. Trueman highlights and mirrors Callaghan’s (2007) work on Catholic school systems in Canada. She argues that Catholic schools position their policies relative to the directives of the Vatican and what she calls “Catholic homophobia” more generally. As a result, LGBTQ+ people in Catholic schools keep their identity hidden. Furthermore, Callaghan writes that “Catholic spokespersons seem more concerned with condemning homosexuals themselves than the harassment of homosexuals” (p. 5).

Extra-curricular: School-based activities. Straight teacher allies often participate in extra-curricular commitments related to their gender and equity activism in addition to their curricular and pedagogical ones. Many participants run GSAs, participate in union committees, organize school-wide celebrations, and/or run workshops for students or staff. The nature of the activities depends upon school culture, gaps in school services, and individual commitment to equity.

Cameron problematizes the effectiveness of the one-off, celebratory days in discussing some of the barriers for allies in schools. He says “We [teachers] put up a poster that says [a classroom or school is] a safe space and therefore, it is. And we don’t actually do anything to make the space safe.” This reflection implies Cameron’s belief that anti-homophobia initiatives need to be more deliberate and active.

Emily also emphasizes the challenges associated with integrating LGBTQ+ equity into everyday school life, especially as they relate to the limitations and challenges of working in a remote, Northern town:

I wanted to do this [start a GSA] in [town name]. There isn’t really outreach or support and I think that’s an issue [that] needs to change, and they need to address that and, if I do end up going back up there [after maternity leave] that’s something that I would like to establish. [I would like to create] a safe zone [for LGBTQ+ students. There are always] anti-bullying campaigns, but they don’t actually address LGBTQ+ [issues] specifically.

LGBTQ+ equity issues are not explicitly or overtly addressed in a school campaign or club in the community where Emily worked before going on maternity leave. She reflects on the fact that as a new teacher she would have had to create a GSA or school based initiative for LGBTQ+ youth in the absence of any previously existing ones. Emily and Trueman are the only two participants who work (in Emily’s case, worked) in schools that do not have any on-going, LGBTQ+ equity initiatives, GSA or otherwise.

Julia focuses simultaneously on her work as a classroom teacher and as a leader in her school. She is dedicated to examining how her activism fits into initiatives at the board level and how her anti-oppressive/queer pedagogy guides her teaching. One of her initiatives is to expand the influence of the Rainbow Club in her school. She relies on the assistance of staff from the district’s school board office

to help her implement meaningful programming, especially amongst grades 4-6 classes where a lot of gender-based bullying occurs. She explains:

You've got kids in the school calling each other faggot, calling each other gay in a way that's mal-intended. The obvious thing is to do some work. And so, this isn't a barrier, but there are administrators who would be uncomfortable with the idea of bringing somebody like that in without maybe checking with the parents first. To me, you know, this is a basic human right – we don't have to check with the parents to be teaching how to be kind to each other, how to be decent to each other.

Like Simon, Julia emphasizes the importance of LGBTQ+ activism as a human rights issue. Her convictions are reflected in her queer, anti-oppressive pedagogy. Her pedagogy resists the dominant and potentially regressive narrative about queer issues in schools. Julia explains what one of the initiatives of the Rainbow Club—Rainbow Week—at her urban elementary school includes:

Monday of Rainbow Week we have a transgender author coming who writes children's books and he is going to read from two of his books. His name is Bear Bergman²⁴ ... he's a career author but also comedian and presenter and his thing is talking about transgender [issues]. I think the transgender piece is really important because particularly for the primary grades kids who are not yet questioning their sexuality but they might already be questioning their gender identity.

Julia's approach, which is to start teaching students about their gender through the work of well-known trans author Bear Bergman, is unique. Her assertion to begin with gender demonstrates that she has a profound understanding of how to introduce her elementary school-aged students queer content and pedagogy. Julia achieves this in ways that are relevant to their development and age-appropriate. She

²⁴ Bear Bergman, trans activist and author's work can be found at <http://www.sbearbergman.com/>

resists the tendency to equate sex with gender or to conflate them. Julia also reflects on the school board policies that are shaping not only her school's culture and context, but the culture and context of the schools in the entire school district:

we are in the [school board] now implementing all gender washrooms in all the schools and we certainly did have students who are not adhering to what might be the extreme you know binary, traditional gender expressions. And we need for everyone to be okay with that so, I think that that's a great way to start the week.

Julia's awareness of and connection to the student population in her school guides the anti-oppressive work that she does, including Rainbow Week. For Julia, Rainbow Week evolved out of what she views as limitations to Day of Pink. She says:

Last year, I started it because we do Pink Day [because] I teach the little ones, all the girls wear pink every day, it's a sea of pink ... it wasn't working. Pink Day wasn't working in my classes because it essentially just meant that we wanted the boys to dress in a girl colour, what they see as a girl colour. So, for the girls it meant nothing and for the boys it was really quite an affront to who they were. And it was hard for them and they resisted it and it made them upset, there is learning from all that, but it wasn't getting to the point of what we wanted them to get at. Which was that we want to embrace about difference in families, how different families could look ... so this year Pink Day is being led by a group of grade 6 kids who are our equity club and they've done a lot of training with the gender-based violence prevention office on how to be leaders.

Julia's description of the limitation of Day of Pink as overly challenging and missing the mark for her young (grade 1) students did not lead to a discontinuation of Day of Pink, but it did result in a shift in the school's anti-homophobia programming. She does not want to see Day of Pink discontinued, but the

core messages and values intensified. Julia developed the programming and deepened the potential impact by engaging student leaders in initiatives that extended beyond Day of Pink.

In Lucy's school, staff participation and leadership (beyond her own involvement) in school-based initiatives can be challenging. She explains the role she often assumes in the schools where she has worked:

We did a few kinds of workshops and things but we had to really drag teachers in to help and all they would do was supervise. There was, it almost became the tip of the tokenism then moved out to the level of "okay those are the teachers that deal with the gay stuff and the sexism stuff" and "I'm [principal] just going to keep hiring supply teachers that make sexist jokes to kids" or "I'm going to continue to teach novels that don't support the existence of the LGBTQ+ students or people in society". So, I did feel like every school I go to there's one or two people and then we become the activists and everyone else thinks "Okay, just like we have a volleyball coach we have a 'take care of these marginalized students' area".

Anti-oppressive educational initiatives in schools, for Lucy, are frequently aggregated with other extra-curricular commitments. Administration and staff often perceive that if they have one or two staff members who are "champions" for marginalized students, then they do not have to worry about that kind of work themselves. Lucy implies that it is the collective responsibility of the entire staff to ensure that LGBTQ+ equity initiatives and that LGBTQ+ students themselves are valued and feel safe at school.

Madison reflects on the way student interest in the GSA can wax and wane. In some years, interest is high while in others, it is challenging to encourage student participation. In years where GSA interest is low, Madison intends to adjust and adapt to engage the students. She explains:

Something I've thought about for next year is maybe trying to do a GSA-type book club rather

than a GSA club. So, we have our librarian, she will use some of her funds to find books and then whoever wants to can be part of that book club. I don't even know if I would call it a GSA book club, I would just advertise the book and it'll have obviously an LGBT focus and whoever wants to come out and read that book. [My] hope [is that] the students who are identifying as part of the [LGBTQ+] community [who] aren't necessarily [coming to meetings], maybe we can just focus on building allies through [something] like a book club.

One of the challenges for Madison in recruiting participants for her GSA, she believes, is the religious and cultural base of the student population in the school where she works. She suggests that teaching at a school with a high percentage of new Canadians who may come from nations where LGBTQ+ issues are not on the radar or openly discussed leads to challenging conversations about gender and sexuality diversity²⁵. Madison uses an example of the days after the nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida²⁶ in the spring of 2016 (only weeks before our interview):

Our librarian made a poster after the Orlando massacre and put it out in our library at the front desk and asked people to sign it. [It] was signed by [students from all faith backgrounds]. It is important in our school to make sure that it's really obvious to those who are not going to be tolerant in that faith or in that culture that the expectation of the school is that [our school is tolerant]. We are not just tolerant – to keep it visible for people that just because we have a high Muslim population that the support isn't there for [the LGBTQ+] community.

In Madison's school, like Jennifer's, Lucy's, Cameron's, and Julia's, there is a complex interplay between queer identities and religious/cultural ones. All five of these participants emphasized the importance of continuing to teach queer content, equity, and inclusion for their students. Madison also

²⁵ Madison uses examples of her perception of conservatism amongst Muslim students at her school. This example is not intended to imply that Muslim people are de facto anti-LGBTQ+.

²⁶ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting.html?_r=0

emphasized the important point that while some Muslim students may come from conservative backgrounds, not all of them do, and that school is a space where many people of diverse backgrounds come together.

Madison describes other initiatives at her school that extend beyond Day of Pink and also the difficulties when student participation in the GSA is low:

[Our school board hosts] a board-wide day of workshops for kids, as well as a board-wide school dance at a central location for all the kids and the GSAs. So, we do all those events. I would say in past years, it's been nice that we had GSA kids that were interested in being part of [the GSA]. [They'd] have a table and they'd put face paint on kids with rainbow colours and whatever. [In years where the GSA is more teacher-led] where we don't have the kids coming out to meetings [staff] put up posters and we encourage staff and kids to wear pink and make sure it's on our Twitter feed – wear pink to support blah, blah, blah. So, I would say it ends up being teacher-led in those years where you just can't get the support from the kids, but we definitely do [events like Pink Day]. My favourite thing is that my board puts a school bus in the Pride parade every summer. And kids are welcome to walk with us.

Madison's use of "blah, blah, blah" is notable in the disregard she shows for common school-based activism like wearing pink. Frequently, activities like Day of Pink (and wearing pink) are used as an example of the progressive nature of a school. Consequently, it is noteworthy that the people organizing them (like Madison) seem to intonate the limits of their effectiveness.

I would not suggest abandoning activities like Day of Pink altogether, but rather acknowledging that they are one component of what should be a more macro, holistic approach to queering schools and school communities. Like Julia, Madison highlights the way her activism complements school board initiatives, as well as those among the broader community, for LGBTQ+ people. Beneficial

opportunities to share ideas and connect with other allies are possible, even in years where student participation may be lower at the school where she works. She also indicates the usefulness of institutional training for LGBTQ+ allies.

Teacher Allies: Training and Support

In this research, straight teacher allies demonstrate their adaptability and responsiveness to LGBTQ+ topics in their classrooms and school-based activities, even though many have little-to-no formal training on gender equity or human rights. While many of the participants organize activities for Day of Pink or, in other cases, Rainbow Week, most of them situate this work at the tip of the proverbial iceberg. More needs to be done, and some participants address this by infusing their classroom content with anti-homophobic and queer lessons. Most of the participants in this study see the curriculum as a living document that has space to infuse more queer content. For Cameron and Julia, this means reading children's books and watching films with queer content. Instead of viewing the inclusion of queer content in the curriculum as controversial or as a nuisance, the participants in this study view it as an opportunity. For Stefan, educators can include queer and Indigenous perspectives, and it is their responsibility as educators. Stefan also highlights the importance of human rights and the interconnected or intersectional nature of oppression. He understands, as does Lucy, that privilege and oppression live in schools, as they do in the rest of society, and that educators must do their best to teach youth (and sometimes colleagues) about it.

Almost all of these educators make queer or anti-homophobic perspectives part of their classrooms given that they are often the only person in their school to do so, and that by taking up this social justice work, they often feel further isolated from their colleagues and wary of parents and administration. However, the fact that infusing queer content and anti-homophobic perspectives is at the discretion of teachers is problematic. For teachers like Lucy, Madison, and Jennifer, presenting a queer

curriculum to their students runs the risk of parent backlash, particularly as they see it from vocal, conservative religious communities. They balance their professional responsibility to respect people's faith backgrounds with their conviction that the rights of LGBTQ+ people must be upheld and honoured. Participants often undertake anti-homophobia initiatives which seek to resist the dominant narratives, but they do not consistently envision or create new ways for schools to exist as queering school models suggest. Those who do challenge the dominant narrative, particularly by focusing on their own privilege, espouse values that seek to queer school spaces. In my research, teachers who challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism seem to be infusing their routines with anti-oppressive education practices, particularly a discourse highlighting the importance of human rights with a focus on students who have experienced oppression or marginalization (Kumashiro, 2004).

There are some limits to these efforts, too. It is likely that Trueman does not challenge the status quo in schools or re-envision the possibilities for change quite as much as the other participants. Even in settings where they do not feel as alienated in their allyship, they face uncertainty. Trueman is fearful of the professional and social repercussions of starting a GSA or pride group in the Catholic school where he works. It seems that Trueman's silence is similar to what Callaghan (2007) describes as the "Catholic response to sensitive issues, such as sexual orientation" (p. 6). A response that contravenes the professional codes of conduct for the Alberta Teachers Association (union) of which Catholic school teachers are a part. Trueman is evidence that this fear can exist among teachers, and the literature reinforces this fact. Ngo (2003), for example, links this fear of professional backlash to a lack of knowledge amongst straight teachers about heteronormativity and heterosexism. It is possible to infer the depth of commitment or critical analysis from some of these participants' responses, but stopping at inferences about them as individuals alone is short-sighted. Schools as institutions and their staff must be challenged to do a better job of advocating for greater social justice by ensuring that the human rights

of the people who attend the school (students and staff) are protected (Goldstein, Russell & Daley, 2007; Griffin & Ouellett, 2012; Kumashiro, 2002; 2004). The participants in this study are the primary individuals leading LGBTQ+ equity initiatives in their schools. What would happen if those teachers left their school? Or how are new, inexperienced teachers to know that honouring LGBTQ+ rights and identities is the rule rather than the exception? Institutional, and not just individual, leadership must become the norm.

Unfortunately, many teacher allies engage in equity and activism work in classrooms and schools with very little educational background, training, or support. School boards and administrators need to support LGBTQ+ youth (and their allies) to ensure not only the drafting, but also the implementation, of safe school policies. The convergence of religious identities (particularly conservative, fundamentalist stances), actively challenge the anti-oppressive position of many of these activists and degrade the existence of LGBTQ+ people. Teachers fear parent backlash even in circumstances where no such resistance has yet occurred.

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Chapter 6: Dear Allies: Focus on Your Privilege!

Abstract

The role of allies in social movements is an area of social justice activism that is at times celebrated and at other times contested. In some cases, allies are celebrated for the “good work” that they do to support marginalized people in their struggle against oppression. They undertake challenging and often times demanding social justice work, often with little to no institutional support or training. Their motivation is to support all the students they teach. In other circumstances, allies are criticized (in some cases quite appropriately) for being naïve, self-interested, privileged, and—put pejoratively—“do-gooders.” Despite the discomfort that discussions of allies and their contributions may cause, particularly for some allies themselves, the role that allies play in social movements is an important area of exploration. Does their negative impact mean that allyship should be abolished altogether? In this discussion, I argue that allyship needs to be envisioned differently, but not completely discontinued. A re-envisioning challenges the current state of affairs of allyship as a “free-ride” for privileged people who want to feel good about themselves. Drawing on data from interviews with educators in Ontario, I argue that allies must become responsible assets to social justice by resisting the dominant narrative of allyship and striving for on-going reflexivity. Cultural critics, like McKenzie (2015), challenge allies need to focus on (and be mindful of) their own privilege to be the most effective and avoid the trappings of what some activists see as self-serving allyship.

Keywords: Anti-oppressive education; Allyship; Straight privilege; Queering schools

Introduction

This paper focuses on the ways that Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) allies, who are also teachers, contribute to equity movements in their schools. At present,

doing so usually involves allies engaging in individual actions against oppression, but it does not frequently include taking systemic action. Through analysis of the stories of straight teacher ally activists in Ontario schools, I explore ways of transforming what it means to be an ally, and I encourage allies to hold themselves accountable to the social movement they serve by focusing on their own privilege. Allies who are willing to sit in the discomfort of self-reflexivity are better situated to work alongside marginalized people (Battiste, 2013; Gehl, 2004; Kumashiro, 2002; 2004). This readiness for retrospection offsets the space that can be taken up by privilege. Reflexivity that is rooted in a recognition of privilege is central to shaping ally experiences and actions that are respectful, humble, and “other”-centered (Kumashiro, 2002; 2004). Taking individual action against oppression is an important step towards equity, but broader systemic challenges must also be confronted. In terms of LGBTQ+ equity in schools, I argue that straight allies must acknowledge straight privilege (their own and others) as a way of confronting not only discrete instances of homophobia, but also systemic heterosexism and heteronormativity (Jackson, 2006; Martino, 1999; Pinar, 1998; 2007; Rodriguez, 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Seidman, 1994). The way that Huelskamp (2014) centers his argument on privilege resonates with my own experiences as an ally and highlights the importance of humility and self-reflexivity for allies. Being an ally is “in many ways the beginning of a journey rather than end of a ‘path of development’” (p. 59). The paradigm suggested by Huelskamp is also powerful because he emphasizes that difficult situations and discomfort are part of the process of becoming an ally.

Straight Allies in Schools

In Ontario (and Canada more generally), schools continue to be sites of daily oppression for LGBTQ+ youth (Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2015). This paper explores the role that straight teacher allies play in gender equity movements in Ontario schools. Although for Bishop (2012), who suggests that allies are “people who recognize the unearned privilege” (p. 1), I challenge the assumption

that allies readily acknowledge their straight privilege. Privilege is a form of dominance of one group over others that maintains social inequities (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Allies and allyship are criticized by marginalized people for the way they co-opt social movements (Thompson, 2003). Critiques like this one lead to some provocative and fruitful questions. For example, are allies trying to alleviate the guilt of their privilege? And even if they are not acting out of guilt, how is the sincerity of an ally measured? Are allies so blind to their own privilege that they will always co-opt a social movement or participate for their own benefit? Challenges launched at allies that are concerned with the self-congratulatory nature of the role and space occupied by privileged people are frequently appropriate. These are criticisms that straight people must read, absorb, and contemplate.

Some in-school campaigns, like Day of Pink and Day of Silence²⁷ raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. However, as many scholars argue, such as Bryson and de Castell (1995), Rasmussen (2002), and Yep (2002), one-off Pride days do not sufficiently honour the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, instead simply demonstrate a toleration of them. They are not the cure-all for homophobia and heterosexism in schools. Goldstein, Russell, and Daley (2007) advocate for a queering of schools that involves “pedagogical practices that trouble the official knowledge of disciplines; disrupt heteronormativity, and promote an understanding of oppression as multiple, interconnected, and ever changing” (p. 187). Other scholars argue the same, launching a salient critique of the dominance of heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006; Martino, 1999; Pinar, 1998; 2007; Rodriguez, 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Seidman, 1994; Thomas, 2000). In other words, superficial actions like wearing a pink shirt are not enough. Substantive systemic changes that re-envision schools and curriculum must occur. Kumashiro (2004) highlights four different approaches of anti-oppressive education. Participants in this

²⁷ For more information on Day of Pink and Day of Silence respectively, see: <http://dayofpink.org/> and <http://www.glsen.org/day-of-silence>

study move between these four areas: improving the experiences of oppressed/marginalized students; changing the way people conceive of difference; challenging power and privilege and their social implications in society and schools; and finally, acknowledging and discussing the challenges associated with anti-oppressive education. Anti-homophobia education often focuses on improving the experiences of marginalized and oppressed peoples, whereas queering education/educational contexts involves challenging the structures of power and privilege in society.

Privileged people with a social conscience, like some allies, find themselves wanting to help others. However, many people lack an understanding of the social forces that create systems of privilege and, conversely, marginalization. In the case of allies in schools, they may not be appropriately trained and/or may lack the school board's support. School staff (administrators, teachers, student support personnel, and custodial staff) are well positioned to influence school culture as allies (Griffin & Ouellett, 2012; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Martino, 1999; Ngo, 2013). School staff have social influence on both students and each other. They can be innovative leaders in school culture. Allies, I argue, are among these school leaders.

Straight privilege is so ubiquitous that it can be difficult for straight people to notice and acknowledge it. Ingraham and Saunders (2016) call this the heterosexual imaginary. The assumption that the experiences of heterosexual people are the only set of human experiences, or the sole way of experiencing the world, reinforces and upholds the dominance of straight people (Callaghan, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Nicholls, 2013; Rich 1980). For instance, straight people can hold hands with their partner in public without fear of provoking a response from others; we can put a picture of our straight partner in our office; and we can rest assured that most media will validate our life experiences. Short (2013) emphasizes that, "the sense of heterosexual moral superiority, cultural achievement, and social privilege permeates all aspects of social life" (p. 117).

The same set of rules can be applied to cisgender people. Being cisgender is an assumed norm in government identification, sports teams, physical education classes, and attendance registers at schools, to name a few. Most cisgender (or cis) people are not made to feel abnormal or unwelcomed by virtue of their bodies and gender presentation. Their lives are validated by social institutions, media, and health care providers. Indeed, the assumption that one's gender is determined by sex category is pervasive. When I (a cisgender woman) go to a doctor's appointment for a pap smear or an ultrasound, I will not be questioned or ridiculed because my assigned gender at birth, based on my sex category, was accurate. Too often, sex is conflated with gender. Following from this, there is a pervasive assumption that individuals can be divided into two categories (the gender binary) that correspond with the traditional sex categories of male and female. This set of assumptions—that all men are male and that all women are female—perpetuates cisgender dominance. These false associations can be conflated under the assumption that all straight-identified people are also cisgender. Dominant culture, therefore, expects women should be sexually attracted to men and should have vaginas (and a uterus), and men should be sexually attracted to women and have penises. Gender equity activism works toward education on the diversity of sexes, genders, and sexual orientations amongst people.

Another important element of this research is the nature of teacher activism in schools. In particular, this research examines the activism and advocacy efforts of straight teachers for gender and sexuality based equity in schools. Short (2014) challenges the notion that teachers should lead social activism in schools, suggesting instead that advocates outside of the school system should challenge school-based heteronormativity. For example, he suggests that the legal system should have a role in influencing heteronormative school culture. This has begun taking place. Bill 13 in Ontario, for instance, sends a message to all students that LGBTQ+ students are welcome in schools. It has far-reaching influence in shaping school culture by nature of it being passed into law. While I agree that individuals

and groups outside of schools should be advocating for change to support students, educators (including administrators, teachers, student support personnel [SSPs]) play an important role in tandem as institutional leaders who can help shift law into policy and practice.

Research Design and Methods

A total of 16 participants from the province of Ontario volunteered to participate in this study. They all identified as straight, cisgender educators (teachers, administrators and/or student support professionals). Participants were recruited via personal and professional networks, social media (Facebook), and email. They were selected on the basis that they self-identified with the criteria outlined in the call for participants: straight-identified; K–12 educators (teachers, administrators, and/or student support personnel [SSP]); currently working in publicly funded (secular and Catholic) schools in Ontario; engaged in gender/sexuality equity work (i.e., a Gay/Straight Alliance lead). Participants range in age from 25 to 60 years. Their experiences are varied, some with two years' teaching experience and others with more than 25 years of experience. Most have approximately 10 years of experience. Of the 16 participants, 2 are Vice Principals (both elementary level), 1 is an SSP,²⁸ 2 are occasional teachers (OTs), and the remaining 11 are full-time classroom teachers (3 elementary and 8 secondary).

This research was guided by narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) identify narrative inquiry as a collaborative process that involves “mutual storytelling and restorying” (p. 4). They identify four stages of narrative inquiry that often overlap and can exist simultaneously for the researcher and participant: living, telling, retelling, and reliving. The experiences participants gain from living, telling, retelling, and reliving are shared in an interview experience. Narrative inquiry frames this research and the storying of the participants' experiences. Stories of experience are more widely accessible to a

²⁸ Also known as an Educational Assistant (EA), or a Teachers' Assistant (TA), these educational professionals support students with individual education plans and/or other unique learning needs in the classroom and/or school environment.

broader-range of readers and also allow advocates and activists the opportunity to reflect on the political nature of the work they do (Barone, 2009). Xu and Connelly (2010) emphasize the importance of stories (retelling lived experience) in education settings and research.

As part of the research process, participants viewed a 14-minute introductory video in which I contextualized my role and goals for the research. I wanted to create a comfortable, sharing environment amongst the research participants and I felt this self-introduction was a helpful starting place because it made the chief researcher less anonymous and more transparent. After watching the video, participants answered four questions²⁹ in a shared, but anonymous web-based document via Google Docs saved via a cloud service (Google Drive). This process helped to give me an idea of some of the participants' ideas and experiences as ally educators before starting an interview. Some participants did not participate in the shared document. Stefan, for example, did not contribute to this section of the research because, as he explained via email, he felt that other participants were attacking school administration. As a Vice Principal, it made him feel frustrated. He worried that his frustrations would skew his neutrality as he responded to the questions himself.

Results

Does “it” really “get better”? This section highlights the experiences and voices of the participants and their ideas around the limitations and challenges of allyship in Ontario schools. I focus on (and in some cases issue cautions about) superficial notions of progress around anti-

²⁹ The 4 questions/prompts are: (1) Please share your successful ally moments; (2) Share your less-than-successful or troubling moments as an ally; (3) What are the limitations of the anti-homophobia initiatives in your school or board? (4) Have I missed something? Is there anything else you want to comment on?

homophobia initiatives (e.g., the It Gets Better Project™³⁰), increased visibility of trans people, job security, and the importance of acknowledging and unpacking straight privilege as key points for understanding the ways in which allyship should be shaped to be responsible and respectful.

Superficial notions of progress. Discussions about the nature of homophobia/transphobia in schools dominated the responses from participants to my question about the barriers faced by allies. Many participants, particularly those with greater teaching experience, identified a perception that gender and sexuality-based oppression had decreased over the course of their career. Cameron articulates:

There is no doubt that there are things that have moved ... hugely. You know, I will share that it's an ebb and flow. So, I think in our board we moved quite a bit, and then the health curriculum came out.

Cameron is cautious, identifying that shifts in school culture may not be unidirectional. He highlights some of the reactions to the new Health and Physical Education curriculum, especially the renewed homophobic response elicited from some parent communities.

Dave believes, optimistically, that schools are primary places for addressing gender inequity. He says that “education is the biggest way of changing because, I mean students, have the potential to be those agents of change ... Whether they do or not, I mean that's up to them. And that's the hard thing to address.” Here, Dave points to a conundrum for ally educators who believe that education has the power to create positive and progressive change, but that it can be difficult to know if that shift does occur. If students stop making homophobic remarks around a teacher who has corrected them, does that mean they have shifted away from homophobia?

³⁰ The It Gets Better Project™ started in 2010 as a video campaign featuring celebrities and other public figures encouraging LGBTQ+ youth that their lived experiences with harassment and bullying gets better as they get older. It is intended to give LGBTQ+ youth hope for the future.

Elizabeth states that “as allies, things are sometimes complicated ... it’s not all a pretty 30 second Public Service Announcement ad where we all dance and rainbows and unicorns and all that.”

Regarding homophobia, she asserts that:

It has become less socially acceptable even amongst students. And sometimes that’s the first step-- just getting kids to realize, you know what, you can’t say that.³¹ I can’t stop you thinking anything you want to think, but you can’t say that. And then eventually they start to question how they’re thinking that.

Despite acknowledging that GSAs and anti-homophobia initiatives are not all “rainbows and unicorns,” Elizabeth expresses a belief that circumstances are improving amongst students and that eventually their exposure to anti-homophobia initiatives (like GSAs and school-based anti-homophobia events) will lead them to question homophobic thinking. She identifies that “it’s a process. If you’re [a queer kid] in that position, I’m sure can be very frustrating. It’s nice. It’s going to keep getting better, but what about right now?” Elizabeth’s responses highlight the complexities related to the seesawing between an “it’s getting better” approach and one that acknowledges the lived experience of oppression for queer people in schools.

Rob adds further complexity to the discussion about homophobia in schools. He highlights his belief that:

Homosexuality has always been in the shadows [that’s] the biggest issue now. It’s just the fact that I think we’ve gotten past the initial sort of blatant, angry—at least from my experience anyway—it’s not nearly, you don’t hear of kids getting bullied because they’re gay ... as much, at least I don’t ... as much as I used to hear.

³¹ The participant is implying the use of homophobic slurs.

Rob grapples with his own perceptions of homophobia in the school where he works, but it is also noteworthy that he seems to be aware—when he qualifies his statement with “at least I don’t”—that his perspective may be influenced by his experiences as a straight man in a position of authority in a school setting. However, it should be noted that a straight person should have limited authority in determining or claiming the state of homophobia in a school.

He reinforces the notion that progress is being made in gender equity movements and that as a teacher ally he can help “kids understand the sort of historical context of things.” He continues:

I think [historical context] is important too, right. This idea that this is not a 20/21st century phenomenon, you know being transgendered,³² it’s not, and or being gay is not you know, it’s always been there—the differences—that we supposedly progressed as a society and can actually process these things now, whereas before we would just throw rocks at it. You know?

In this passage, Rob articulates the notion that queer and trans folks have always existed—that a recent increase in visibility of queer and trans people does not mean that they did not exist before a time of greater visibility. His previous comment about queer folks “living in the shadows” helps to contextualize this statement. Rob’s declaration about throwing rocks is especially challenging because of the seemingly flippant nature with which he articulates a violent lived experience of many queer/trans people. The remark is not only apparently flippant, but it is also inaccurate because queer and trans people continue to experience violent physical attacks that are motivated by their difference. While attacks of this kind may not be happening as frequently in many schools as they once did, that does not mean they are not happening. Furthermore, homophobia and transphobia (overt and covert) have violent components that are harmful and dangerous.

³² This word is the participant’s word choice. Transgender is the most appropriate term.
<http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

Cameron shares his perceptions of homophobia, transphobia, and the acceptance of queer and trans kids in schools:

It [gender and sexuality] doesn't bother the kids for the most part. So, in those ways, when people say "We're getting better" those are changes, those are shifts. What I find as an elementary school teacher is that for an out queer teacher who is out to their kids [students], out to their parents [students' parents], life for the most part is precarious. And they never know when the next shoe is going to fall.

As an accompaniment to Cameron's earlier statement about things in ebb and flow, this quotation articulates what alternating responses to queer/trans rights might look like in a school setting. While teachers may be out in their professional lives (a progressive step), their safety in being out is not a guarantee.

Stefan articulates his rationale for his own allyship. He identifies that his motivation for being an ally is "to make the world a better place. Without that piece, I just feel like you can't go far." While this statement could be read as somewhat naïve, Stefan does identify that his intentions as an ally originate in caring feelings and a desire to improve the lives of students. Many of the participants in this study became allies as a result of having been called on by students to fulfill this role, but some came to this activism because of their deeply held socio-political values—from an innate sense of obligation to do what is right.

I understand many of the participants' motivations and their corresponding values because I hold some of them myself. For example, I have a genuine desire for greater equity within the institutions where I work and the community where I live. When I worked in K–12 schools, I wanted those spaces to be safer and more equitable for students. Allies, like me, must approach allyship while considering and mitigating their straight privilege and the normalizing impact of straightness within social

institutions (Jackson, 2006; Martino, 1999; Pinar, 1998; 2007; Rodriguez, 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Seidman, 1994). Whatever their reason for allyship, allies (including me) need to be cautious and self-reflective when navigating their role. Instead of asserting that, “things are getting better,” it is important to reflect on why it is we (as straight cisgender educators) think so. Furthermore, we must ask, who does such thinking serve? Do we believe in the “it gets better” theory because it would be better for us if “this thing” we cared about and worked at was substantially improving? Unfortunately, recent studies show that LGBTQ+ youth continue to experience daily, consistent bullying and harassment despite the prevalence of pink shirts, rainbows, and safe spaces in their classrooms (Taylor et al., 2015). I can appreciate how disheartening this can be for straight allies (not to mention for the bullied and harassed youth), for people who genuinely want to “make a difference,” but an honest facing of the facts and reality is what is called for. This is also important when it comes to the systemic oppression of trans students in schools.

Trans students: Classrooms, washrooms, change rooms. Trans students, according to the participants in this study, are more visible than ever in schools, and many participants presented trans student visibility in schools as a measure of progress in terms of school safety and inclusivity. Simultaneously, participants in this research noted that their paucity of knowledge and experience in this area limited and challenged their allyship, remarking that they lacked the language, skills, and training to be effectively supportive of trans youth. For example, Elizabeth says, “I think understanding trans from outside is harder because most of us don’t have an experience of not feeling like we’re ourselves. And I think there’s some pretty deeply embedded assumptions about gender that get complicated.” Elizabeth’s reflection on gender shows her knowledge of gender-based oppression, but does not challenge the hegemony of heterosexuality or heteronormativity (Jackson, 2006; Martino, 1999; Pinar, 1998; 2007; Rodriguez, 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Seidman, 1994).

Cameron reflects on his own growth as an ally for trans youth. He highlights why it is important to distinguish between queer identities and trans ones. It is important for cisgender allies, he says, to really recognize trans as a different way. That it isn't an umbrella part of queerness ... and maybe an interesting facet would be to recognize that, you know, people who are allies for L-G-B students because of the world that we live in, you know, may harbour some transphobia that they haven't really dealt with.

I echo Cameron's concerns, and I think some of the participants in this study reflect the transphobia that Cameron discusses here. Cameron himself, along with Elizabeth, Carrie, and Stefan identify being at a loss or having a lack of training in terms of understanding and working with trans youth. While this position is an important stance from which growth can occur, it is troubling that even allies in schools struggle, and, in some cases, fail to support trans youth. A failure to provide support within a school can result in ignorant assumptions about trans people. If educators lack the tools for understanding the experiences of trans students/people, then it is difficult to address instances of transphobia. Transphobic instances stem from trans ignorance, but not all trans ignorance is necessarily transphobia. Better systems of training for all educators can provide educators with the tools for fostering a better knowledge base for trans people.

Carrie reinforces some of the dominant discourse about trans students when she points to a training gap in her teaching practice. While relaying a story in which she struggled to understand a trans student she had in her class, Carrie explains that the trans student ostracized herself from her peers by self-identifying as a witch. Carrie's conclusion from this experience is that "there's, you know, an attention seeking component to some of that group of kids. And I felt badly because that affected how she was accepted into that class." It is hard to know from this example whether the student Carrie is talking about was unaccepted by her peers because of her identification as a witch or because students

feared her difference as a trans person. While Carrie is comfortable employing all her students' preferred pronouns, her application of the negative labels "attention seeker" and references to "some of that group" reinforce marginalization of trans students. Trans youth are certainly not the only group of teenagers/young people who seek attention from their peers and teachers.

Carrie succinctly identifies a key area of oppression for trans students in schools: changerooms. She identifies a coworker, in physical education (PE) who

has more experience with the transgender piece because of the whole changeroom thing. She's got some grade 9s that are, you know [trans], of course we have [names another coworker] and he's like "ugh I'm not teaching that person", so she's got a really sort of homophobic jock guy who is causing more work for [her] because he won't help out or whatever the case may be.

Taken together, the two preceding quotations demonstrate the complexity of Carrie's thoughts and approach to working with trans students. The first illustrates some of the challenges she has working with trans youth and some of the biases she holds. In the second quotation, she highlights the importance of student safety and supporting diverse student groups in the school. When contrasted with the other teacher she identifies in her anecdote, her perspective and approach are drastically more progressive. Carrie also raises the importance of educating staff, or more to the point, of addressing the discriminatory views held by staff members.

Dave reflects on his experiences as an occasional teacher who frequently works in the same school as Carrie. He claims that all the teachers at Carrie's school

have been very accepting with the name ... the change [of a trans student] ... because the [student's] name still shows up on the attendance as the original name ... in the teacher notes it says, this is J's name, please refer to her as this and no one creates a fuss about it. No one; everyone goes along with it. It's great.

Dave's perception as an occasional teacher at the school is that trans students are universally accepted by all staff members. By contrast, Carrie's comments in the previous section highlight transphobia enacted by staff. This demonstrates how straight/cis teachers' perceptions can shape their viewpoint. Dave has never overheard transphobic comments; as such, he believes that transphobia does not exist in that school at least amongst staff.

Elizabeth, like Carrie, reinforces some of the dominant narrative about trans people and gender identity, highlighting the greater visibility of trans youth as a measure of social progress. She says:

We're dealing with more trans youth and how to help them and how to help everybody else understand what's going on because I think for many people it's not much of a stretch—even if you're straight—gay makes sense, that's who you love most ... And I think there's some pretty deeply embedded assumptions about gender that get complicated and we have two students transitioning in our school, one staff member transitioning in our school.

Elizabeth asserts that “we [cis people] know who we are” and that it can be hard to understand trans people or for trans people to understand themselves. The assumption Elizabeth articulates in this statement is that trans people do not know who they are and that cisgender people do. More than anything, this statement reflects an instance of Elizabeth's unacknowledged privilege as a cisgender person.

Madison highlights some of the complex interplay between cultural identities, gender, and sexuality. She recalls an incident with some newly-arrived immigrant students at her school and their reaction to a trans student:

She [one of the newcomers to Canada] was part of that English language development program, so new to our country and she sort of said “Miss, boy or girl?” [inquiring about another student present in the classroom] and I said “well, born a boy, but lives as a girl now” and she sort of

stuck her tongue out went “ugh,” but that was all there was to it. She didn’t say anything to that student, she didn’t take it any further, she didn’t say anything rude that was just like, you know, so they are definitely curious about it and they ask people if they’re comfortable with, but you know, it’s pretty rare that I see any outward expression of discrimination.

Madison presented an example of one student’s overtly transphobic reaction to another student, but dismissed it because it “didn’t go any further” than one student making a face of disgust toward another. This reflects some cisgender privilege on Madison’s part, but it also contextualizes the social climate for equity in her school. As a teacher, she is expected to navigate the myriad worldviews both of students newly arrived to Canada (some as immigrants, some as refugees) and of students born and raised in Canada.

She discusses the early phases of implementing gender neutral washrooms in her school and the hardships endured by trans students in trying to access facilities. She questions:

How embarrassing [for the trans students] that every time that you have to pee you have to come and find a staff member and someone that you feel comfortable coming to see and saying “Can I borrow your key?” or she would have to go to the principal and go there.

The school board where Madison works now has gender-neutral bathrooms in every school, but that system also has its challenges. She says, “It’s like someone just slapped a [gender neutral] sign on the first bathroom they came to with no foresight as to how that’s going to make people feel.” Madison said she rarely sees the gender-neutral bathroom used, except for students who want to go into the washrooms together and especially for girls who want to seem “ballsy” or cheeky and brave. Madison believes the washroom is rarely used because of the location and the lack of consultation from the board as to which bathroom to choose. This is not to say that Madison is unaware of the transphobia in her school, she is, but she identifies how other factors (location and consultation) exacerbate or reinforce

transphobic assumptions. The impact of misguided policy and practice turns gender-neutral washrooms into a public relations stunt rather than a safety measure for youth.

Simon, a student support person³³ (SSP) and GSA leader, situates himself as an advocate for trans youth in his school. He explains:

There are two [students] who are in transition. They are identifying as transgender people. And they are having some problems with the fact that the school system imposes a name to them. Right? So, they are trying to find a solution for that issue and it's going to be my role to advocate for them and the equity and inclusiveness education work and the school board is working developing a policy in that area. So, they [the students] are very serious, they came to me and said "this is what we want" and "this is the type of research that we've done" and I went to [another school board policy] and they have a policy and we want that policy to be reflected here.

Simon uses his institutional power as a staff person and his social capital as a straight, cis person to advocate for the students' right to choose and define their own name at school. In this example, the students direct the focus of the advocacy and Simon is working for them, using his position to aid their efforts. In other words, Simon is not setting the agenda as to what is important and/or requires action; the students are.

For Stefan, advocacy for trans youth is not limited to a school setting alone.

Conversations are spilling over to his family dinners:

This [transphobia/homophobia] is something that's important, but just my family was and they're not in education they're blown away by this. They're like "what are you talking about?" They're

³³ Student support personnel (sometimes called Educational Assistant [EA] or Teacher Assistant [TA]) work with students who require additional learning support in the classroom. Simon works with individual students and attends their classes with them to support their learning.

still stuck in: boy-girl-done. Like they're really oblivious to it, so how are we going to change this? We start with the generation now in the schools.

Stefan articulates an important advocacy stance which is rooted in his experiences as an educator. Publicly funded schools are major access points for communities. In his interview responses, Stefan expresses that educational institutions, in their position of power, should be leaders in creating a democratic culture. Working in a front-line capacity in schools means that he is exposed to ideas and experiences that he may not have been otherwise because of his straight/cis privilege. When confronted with conversations around the family dinner table, he uses his experiences and perspectives to have deeper conversations about gender diversity. Like Dave's earlier statement, Stefan sees education as a major tool for social progress.

Rob also discusses his students' transphobia: "You know issues around kids trying to process the Caitlin Jenner³⁴ thing for example, or things along those lines, it's a punchline to them ... I don't think they quite understand the emotional impact of all that sort of stuff." By presenting the issue of students' transphobia, Rob prompts a thought-provoking question: How can students learn about the emotional impact of their transphobic comments? Rob may have been spurred more quickly than some participants to this consideration because, in one school in Rob's school district, transphobia has been perpetrated overtly by school administration in the last decade: "They told the trans student to go and go to the bathroom at the gas station down the road ... I was certainly speaking to colleagues at other schools about how screwed up the whole situation was." This points to a need to be mindful and aware of the actions privileged people take and how schools (including their leadership and staff) can act in a

³⁴ Caitlin Jenner, a television celebrity and former athlete, publicly transitioned in the spring of 2015. Shortly thereafter she was featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine.

discriminatory way. Significantly, the response of the administration in this case is a breach of the Codes of Professional Conduct for Educators in Ontario as it is in the rest of Canada.

Julia reflects upon her journey through allyship. She says:

I feel like I'm still at the very very beginning of my learning ... I don't even have the words to say what I want to say, but part of my learning is becoming ok with my ignorance around it you know and being, admitting uncertainty.

She provides an example of a dinner party for a friend whom she didn't realize was transitioning and publicly using the wrong pronouns to describe her friend. While she does not specifically use the word "privilege," Julia articulates her growth as an ally around critical self-reflecting on her privilege (her ignorance) as a cisgender person.

Kelly, a new vice principal with 3 years of experience (11 overall in education³⁵), identifies how privilege (straight/cis/white) is at the center of her practice as an ally. She works hard to identify her own straight privilege. She came to her identity as an ally by working in a teaching team with an out, bisexual teacher. When Kelly first met her friend and influential teaching partner, she was not actively aware of her own straight privilege and made public homophobic jokes in the staff room, something she is mortified to recall. Now, she frequently encounters and challenges homophobic and transphobic conversations from parents in her school community and her own family at holiday meals and other occasions. Kelly says that "talking about privilege makes you feel like a moving target—privilege gives us the way to meet staff where they are." As a Vice Principal, she uses her leadership role to try to teach the staff about the importance of identifying their own social privilege. To achieve this, she arranges lunch time workshops on a variety of related subjects, with a focus on privilege and its relationship to

³⁵ The contents of Kelly's interview are summarized here, with fewer quotations because of a technical error when recording her interview. These passages were approved by Kelly before including them here.

oppression. She ensures that staff participate in these workshops, even covering staff members' supervision duties so that they can attend. She sees privilege as a starting point for ally work and advocacy.

Privilege? Who? Me? When it comes to allyship and privilege, Gehl (2004) advises that acknowledging privilege and openly discussing it is of primary importance in order to challenge larger systems of oppression. Some participants, such as Stefan, rarely identify straight privilege. Likewise, Trueman acknowledges the subject is not foremost in his thoughts, or indeed in his thoughts at all: "Straight privilege is not something I can say I've given thought to or that I've even really heard about until ... ahh ... you." I asked Trueman whether he thought (unacknowledged) straight privilege was pervasive in his school. He responded, "I'd say so, Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, from what you told me, I'm pretty convinced that's in my school and then everywhere."

Elizabeth differs from these two participants, having first identified her own straight privilege when she became colleagues with a gay couple who had been closeted for most of their professional lives. At the time, she herself was a young teacher who was newly engaged to her heterosexual partner. Even though her colleagues were out in their professional lives, they still travelled to work separately every day. She notes this experience as pivotal to acknowledging her own straight privilege because she drove to work every day with her fiancé without fear of reprisal. Although not all participants are as advanced as Elizabeth in so far as recognizing straight privilege is concerned, many are trying to make changes. Further to his remark above, Stefan articulates his own experiences of trying to learn to acknowledge his privilege. He says:

I'm so ignorant to my own privileges. And even now, I think about things I take for granted and I want to be more aware of what I am taking for granted and I don't know unless I go to workshops ... just using the washroom, I think is a privilege now.

Here, Stefan, presents his own humility as he works through the process of deepening his understanding of privilege as an ally.

Julia focuses on the importance of recognizing cis and straight privilege for oneself to encourage engagement from school community members. She says:

I think it [straight privilege] goes hand-in-hand with the, you know, the anti-heteronormative kind of perspective. Your privilege as a non-transgender person ... a cisgender [person], your privilege as a cisgender person, of course. It's something people don't think about. It's just something they take for granted so I think that we can all engage in.

Julia builds her own narrative of allyship around her experiences of privilege. She sees privilege and self-reflection upon one's privilege as necessary and important parts of straight allyship.

Elizabeth recounts a discussion with her husband around the limitations of their perceptions as straight people:

He said "well, I don't think there's a lot of really overt violent homophobic remarks [in the school]" and then my husband stopped himself and then he said, "I don't actually think I'd know if there were. You know what, I don't think I'd see it, scrap that remark, I think that was a dumb comment because I think there are whole areas where we're oblivious because we don't see it."

Here, Elizabeth recounts a conversation that reflects an acknowledgment of the short-sightedness straight people can have in making proclamations about the safety of LGBTQ+ youth in schools. This kind of injudiciousness needs to be corrected. Elizabeth articulated that:

It [school culture] certainly has strong elements of homophobia and I think sometimes as teachers—as with many negatives—sometimes we aren't going to see the most negative because they're kids [and] are going to hide it from us. They're not going to say it in front of me, they're not that stupid. We have gotten rid of some of the most blatant. The hidden stuff is most difficult

to get rid of because unless you're an idiot you're not going to call someone a "fag" in front of me.

Participant responses to their own straight privilege are complex and multifaceted. At some points, they reinforce dominant narratives about gender and sexuality, while at other times they challenge assumptions (their own and others) about heterosexism and heteronormativity. They are deeply committed to their work as allies, guided most often by a desire to improve the lives and safety of their students. However, without greater institutional training, they can stumble into regressive ideas that reinforce heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia rather than challenging these norms as they intend.

Huelskamp (2014) suggests that there is no "clear blueprint ... which speaks to cissexual allyship within the trans community" (p. 56). He goes on to say that his cisgender privilege, including his ability to use the washroom of his choice without recourse, something Stefan also discusses, means that other people's perception of him/his gender reflect his reality. This experience, Huelskamp acknowledges, is a huge source of privilege and safety in his daily life. Reflecting upon his daily experiences of privilege was an important step in his own allyship as a queer person to trans folks. Significantly, he articulates that allies may not and in fact should not assume the title of ally for themselves. He says "an ally may have 'unilaterally' assumed the title of ally or just assumes they are an ally – without ever having been designated an ally by a person or a group of people" (p. 58). Huelskamp goes on to articulate some proposed stages in an allies' development. The ideal position, he argues, is as an aspiring ally. This is not "a termination stage" but a place that requires an ally to continue to "actively engage in new experiences, education, and reflection in order to continue to grow" (p. 58). The dominant discourse and perception of allies is that allyship is endlessly rewarding and, whether acknowledged or not, something privileged people do to feel good about themselves. Like Huelskamp, I

believe that allies can, should, and must do better than this self-centered and self-serving approach to activism.

Beyond Do-Gooders

Practices that allies can engage in include listening more, asking questions of youth they work with about their goals, being open to receiving criticism of current practices, and engaging continuously in rigorous self-reflection. Moreover, because language is a powerful social force, allies should use caution in the words and phrases they choose to employ (Gehl, 2004). For example, there are instances throughout the data where the participants use “othering” language (us/them; “students like that”) and make references to violent acts against the other, including phrases such as “throwing rocks at” queer students. While much of this language is used casually, micro-aggressions (unconscious or unintentional derogatory actions or non-verbal cues) are part of a suite of normalized homophobic and transphobic actions (Nadal et al., 2016). Phrases and word choices that reinforce oppression (inadvertently or otherwise), uphold the dominant discourse rather than challenge it. Challenging the dominant gender/sexuality discourse is crucial for allies and is essential for supporting queer/trans students and creating more equitable climates in schools.

These modifications to ally behaviour appear to be simple, but to achieve these aims in a meaningful way requires allies to recalibrate their work with a focus toward their social privilege as straight people. In other words, allies should not be engaged in this work for any personal or professional accolades they may receive. In terms of allyship to trans youth, allies should not present trans students as the next frontier for their allyship. To do so is not emancipatory, but another form of objectification and oppression. Furthermore, allies must not naively assume that the emergence of trans students is new or that their numbers are increasing.

On an individual level, all participants in this research contribute to improving equity movements in their schools (and sometimes in their personal circles). It is critical for allies to challenge individual instances of homophobia and heterosexism in the lived daily experiences of queer/trans people. Alleviating systemic challenges and, ultimately, reforming school/school board leadership and policies are essential. Allies should be shifting their gaze in the direction of systemic changes in addition to their own rigorous self-reflexive practices.

A critical aim of this research involves a call for straight people to acknowledge their straight privilege. So, why is it so hard for most straight people to acknowledge and then accept their privilege? Some of the participants in this research are aware of their straight privilege, but many are not. Awareness alone is quite shallow. What does a person do with their privilege once they are aware of it? Many of the self-identified allies in my research are unaware of the privilege that being straight brings into their lives. This raises more questions: What is the impetus for identifying straight privilege? What needs to happen for straight people to come to know their own privilege in society? For some participants, such as Lucy and Samuel, knowing their own privilege came through university education. For Stefan, it came from colleagues and workshops. In Trueman's case, participating in this research was the first time he encountered the idea of straight privilege. In many of these examples, participants came to this information because of a choice they made to be straight allies and advocates for human rights. How then does the notion of straight privilege become a normalized concept so that people discuss it without being in a certain program in university, or a participant in a workshop or research study? How do well-meaning straight people come to deconstruct hegemonic heterosexuality? (Rodriguez, 2007). As often happens when I teach conceptions of power, privilege, and oppression to post-secondary students, a resistance occurs amongst the most privileged, at least as a first response. It makes them uncomfortable to discuss privilege and causes them to feel like any hardship they may have

experienced in their lives is somehow ridiculed or erased. I hear frequent responses such as, “I can be oppressed, I have difficult life experiences!” in these classes. It is a common sentiment, in my experience, amongst straight people who are reticent to identify their privilege. Participants in this study, myself included, are in the business of educating people. Straight, cisgender, white people occupy privilege social locations. As such, the research results could have presented more layered and intersectional perspectives with participants of more diverse or varied social locations. Furthermore, my own social location so closely resembling that of many of the participants also limits the scope of the narratives. For example, my allyship to LGBTQ+ people is shaped by my experiences of gender oppression as a woman. I often consider my own actions as a straight person in an intersectional way. For example, when I attend meetings (as a young female faculty member) I am keenly aware of how much space male colleagues occupy. I try to apply this experience where I may feel frustrated because others are dominating a meeting or the space to speak and consider how I can make more space (or take up less) for LGBTQ+ faculty members, people of colour, and/or disabled people in this meeting. In other words, I try to consider how a person of colour, a disabled person, or a queer person (sites where I have privilege and they experience oppression) may experience the meeting or classroom. If a lack of diversity exists on a committee or in a classroom, that is also cause for question and self-reflection. As an exploratory work, however, my research demonstrates how complex the suggestion of educating against oppression can be. Challenging heterosexuality and heteronormativity are central to this process (Jackson, 2006; Martino, 1999; Pinar, 1998; 2007; Rodriguez, 2007; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Seidman, 1994).

Another suggestion that emerges from this research is that people with privilege must work at all levels of their lives to root out and identify their own privilege. As they do so, they must also call out privilege in their friends, family members, and coworkers. Like scholars who call for settler people to

decolonize their minds and lives (Barker, 2017; Battiste, 2013; Finley, 2011), straight people must also confront the normalized privilege that comes with straightness and make space for queer ways of knowing and being. In short, self-identified allies need to accelerate their efforts to address LGBTQ+ inequities. This charge does not necessarily imply broadening the scope of their work; rather it suggests a deepening of their commitment to uncovering the role of privilege in their own lives. Calling out heterosexist and heteronormative assumptions within themselves and others is a good place to start.

Advice for Non-Allies

My research focuses on straight allies for LGBTQ+ youth, but what of those who work in schools who do not identify as allies? What should they take (if anything) from my research? Furthermore, there are self-identified allies in this study who do not always act in ways that allies and advocates should, perpetuating, instead of challenging homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. So, what does this research give those who are non-allies and/or those who move fluidly between the ally and non-ally position? How can this research preach not only to the converted, but those who stand on the fence or on the other side of the line? On the one hand, I answer these questions thinking that non-allies (or those moving fluidly between the two categories) should smarten-up, find a way to address their own privilege despite the discomfort that may cause, and leverage it to make a difference in the lives of the students they work with. On the other, I understand that this maybe unrealistic for some, at least at this point in time. Once upon a time at the outset of this research, I posed a question to a caring, yet reluctant, would-be straight ally friend of mine, which I now present here. To those caring educators who maybe fearful to stand-up and say something. The question is this: when (not if) a student comes out (perhaps during their tenure in schooling or later in their adult life) and starts to tell their story being an LGBTQ+ person in school, what role do they (non-allies) want to play in their personal history? Do they want to be the antagonist in their story? one of the silent oppressors? or do

they want to be a safe harbour? For those who answer the latter, the time to acknowledge, mitigate, and militate against heterosexism and heteronormativity in their life and school is now. If their answer is the former, I urge non-allies to consider how and why it is they are comfortable being the antagonist. The subtext of this question is that there are many more LGBTQ+ and/or questioning students in schools than teachers will know, but sincere and caring intentions plant seeds that will have a positive impact in a students' life. For straight allies (and non-allies) the risks associated with advocating for students who identify as LGBTQ+ are minimal, while the potential impact is great.

Conclusion

Moving past arguments that present allyship as “good work” for which allies themselves deserve accolades, I present evidence for a need for more self-reflexive and critical considerations of allyship. As cautioned by Huelskamp (2014), allies cannot assume the title themselves and sit comfortably within that role. Allies should, and, indeed, must engage in rigorous self-reflection and reflexive practices. Some critics cite their exasperation with allies as self-serving or self-interested in the ways they position themselves in social movements³⁶. I encourage allies to consider the conditions under which they are making a claim to an ally identity. Gehl (2004) highlights the importance that allies take a back seat to the marginalized they are allied with and ensure they do not occupy time, space, and/or resources that should be allocated for others. I offer this, not as a harsh criticism of allies, but as a way to ensure that allies achieve their goals for equity and particularly, that they are not unintentionally stalling more

³⁶ See some cultural critics arguments here:

<https://matadornetwork.com/life/dear-straight-allies-please-dont-come-pride-youve-understood-6-things/>;

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/how-white-americans-can-fight-racism>;

<https://www.damemagazine.com/2017/02/13/black-activists-dont-want-white-allies-conditional-solidarity>;

<http://www.bgdblog.org/2015/11/the-difference-between-real-solidarity-and-ally-theatre/>

equitable environments in schools. They should challenge themselves to have a heightened sense of awareness of the impact of their actions on others. This highly self-conscious stance would likely result in a perpetual state of discomfort for allies. Despite being unpleasant, there is value in discomfort for allies as they unlearn privilege. I would also issue a caution to those allies who experience straight, cis privilege and rely on their own (privileged) lens to determine the level of safety for queer youth (and adults) in their schools. In particular, allies should not be quick to jump to the conclusion that things are better, especially since there is mounting evidence which demonstrates that, in fact, homophobia and transphobia continue to thrive despite efforts to root them out (GLSEN, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2015). If, upon reflection, privileged people cannot find a way to change their approach as allies, then they should refrain until they can be better, more respectful allies. Centering one's allyship on one's own privilege (and not on pity for marginalized people or on a sense of self-congratulation) is essential to be a respectful, responsible ally.

Although most public schools no longer have overtly homophobic policies, covert forms of homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and transphobia are salient and prevalent forces in schools (GLSEN, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2015). These social forces are often perpetuated by dominant groups who benefit from the status quo. Straight allies should not recreate social norms and hierarchies with themselves in greater positions of power and privilege. Whether intentionally or inadvertently, normalizing cisgender straightness contradicts the very enterprise queer pedagogies and the activists who espouse them should be trying to resist (Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004). I urge allies to reflect upon their experiences as a way of reminding straight (cisgender, white, able-bodied) allies that being a respectful ally is possible, but it is hard work.

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Chapter 7: Conclusion: Where Does this Research Belong?

I situate this research within a growing body of literature that seeks to understand the role privileged allies play within equity movements. I present a critique of privilege and a call for a more overtly radical commitment from allies working in school environments. Queer theorists and queer Indigenous scholars articulate strong arguments for the ways that white and straight privilege regulate daily life for both non-dominant and dominant groups in schools and society (Driskill, Finley, Gilley, & Morgensen, 2011; Morgensen, 2011). Anti-homophobia work in schools is a necessary and important first step toward ensuring the safety of LGBTQ+ students in schools. However, donning a pink t-shirt or putting up a poster is insufficient without envisioning ways of making space for multiple, queer identities, and addressing straight privilege. Activism and advocacy that targets the more covert forms of oppression, namely heterosexism and heteronormativity, has the potential to foster longer-lasting, more robust shifts in school culture. For example, teacher allies can use their privilege to advocate for better policies on student records. They might advocate for a policy that would enable students to choose their name on school-based documents like attendance forms and select the pronouns that are used in their report cards. From homophobic and transphobic remarks to institutional examples of heteronormativity like the aforementioned, schools are frequently oppressive spaces for queer youth. This research explores and, in some cases, challenges the ways that allies, at least the ones who participated in this research, work toward school-based equity. Some participants acknowledge and leverage their privilege, while others do not.

I argue in this research that straight privilege can operate in self-serving ways. I maintain that those who are attempting to be the “good straight” person, but who fail to be self-critical are serving themselves by identifying as an ally. The conditions under which one chooses to identify as an ally can involve a failure to acknowledge the role straight privilege plays in heterosexism and homophobic

culture. This is not the case for all allies, many are effective and fulfill the demands of their profession as well as their allyship. However, shallow forms of allyship exist, some would argue are all-too-common. Constructing allyship as comforting the conscience of privileged straight, cisgender folks rather than creating safer, more inclusive spaces and experiences for marginalized people is deeply problematic. Allies need to work with one another to address this phenomenon. In this case, the possibilities offered by queer theory and more specifically, the sharing of bad stories are helpful to building more robust and effective ally movements. In a school-based context providing training for allies and release time so that they can have time to build more comprehensive and self-reflective programming for GSAs or other equity activities. For example, teacher allies could spend an afternoon together considering the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (otherwise known as a SWOT analysis) of their school relative to gender and sexually marginalized youth experiences. From this training, educators can consider what things they are doing well and effectively and those where they may need to focus on. Once educators have completed such training, a similar exercise could occur with departments, staff, and students.

Responsible allies, according to Gehl (2004), are interested in openly challenging power structures and are aware of and speak freely about their privileges. They do not act out of guilt, take up space (especially at public meetings), and/or use resources intended for the marginalized group. Gehl specifically refers to allies of Indigenous groups, but similar approaches are relevant to school-based straight allies as well. I would add to Gehl's list of responsible allies the criteria that allies do not use their role for professional gain. They should reflect on their purpose for engaging in anti-oppressive education. In some cases, particular initiatives in schools can receive special funding or accolades (LGBTQ+ students, Indigenous, and/or students of colour). Individual allies' intentions should not be rooted in a desire either to advance themselves or to be recognized because of their so-called benevolent

actions. The motivation should be intrinsic; it should be entrenched in a desire for greater equity and/or an eagerness to alleviate the impact of oppressive power structures in society. It is also the responsibility of allies to self-reflect and to learn more about how to fulfil their role effectively. For many allies, including myself, the motivation and work as an ally starts in a shallow and/or ill-conceived place, filled with good intentions. As a young teacher, I was certainly naïve in terms of my impact. My own self-centeredness may have been rooted in naïveté, but it was also the result of a life of straight privilege. Like some of the participants in this research, I thought that my very presence and involvement was enough. So, while I would caution individuals of the pitfalls of this stance, I also show that through self-reflexive practice, engagement, self-education, and learning from the bad stories it is possible to move into an ally stance that has more depth, substance, and humility.

Summary of findings

Popular discourse about Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Ontario often uses the existence of these groups as proof that Ontario schools are becoming safer and more inclusive for LGBTQ+ students. However, to assume that schools are safe for LGBTQ+ students because a GSA exists is misguided. GSAs are important, but they are not a cure-all for homophobia and transphobia in schools. LGBTQ+ students may not otherwise have a safe place in their lives (at home or amongst friends), but a GSA cannot be the only measure of a school's commitment to equity issues. In my career as a high school teacher, school boards often latched onto GSA events (like Day of Pink) as a measure of inclusion and diversity in schools, and they used this to promote their schools as better than other districts that lacked these benchmarks.

Despite efforts to eradicate LGBTQ+ related inequities, current literature indicates that the majority of LGBTQ+ students (or those perceived as such) experience homophobic or transphobic harassment on a daily basis (GLSEN, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). Taylor et al. (2015) corroborated this

data with their own findings. And so, despite the efforts of LGBTQ+ teachers and students, along with their allies, homophobic and transphobic harassment continues to exist, business-as-usual, in schools. It is not the fault of GSAs that discrimination persists, but this endurance should indicate a need for further changes to school policies and curriculum. A critical evaluation of the structure of schools, the policies that shape them, and the available training for leaders is critically important.

This research explored the question: *How can straight teacher ally activists move beyond the limits of anti-homophobia education by challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools?* It is rooted in my own experiences as a straight teacher ally stumbling and fumbling through my own experience.

As Chapter 4 demonstrates, straight teacher ally stories are complex, not static. Sometimes they are progressive voices for change and at other times they maintain the status quo. Many participants in this research have intersectional social justice interests, such as the ones highlighted in Chapter 5. In addition to being advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, these teachers also advocate for students of colour in their schools—usually Indigenous and Black students. Most often, participants in this research cited students who are of Muslim faith (and their parents) as a powerful, and in all cases, regressive, social force. In doing so, some participants, such as Lucy, Madison, and Kelly, cited that they did not think Islam needed to be at odds with queer students, but that it was often a reality. Other participants, such as Lucy, Cameron, and Julia, assume a leadership stance in their school can become the “go-to” person for LGBTQ+ issues in their school. Lucy articulates the weakness of an approach where one or two teachers become the contact for social justice issues, becoming in this sense much like the coach of an athletic team. She argues that the protection of students’ human rights should not be the sole responsibility of one or two teachers; in other words, the issue of human rights cannot be treated like an extra-curricular activity. Many participants started doing LGBTQ+ equity work in their classrooms and then became

involved in advocacy work as GSA leaders (Madison, Simon, Elizabeth), in the union (Cameron), or in their community (Julia). Many participants (Andrew, Dave, Stefan, Rob, Jennifer, Emily, Carrie) support the efforts of the GSA in their school by participating in events, encouraging their students to do the same, and being mindful of curriculum delivery. Trueman is the only participant that is currently not engaged in any LGBTQ+-related advocacy or activism. Participants that are focused on their own experiences of privilege—notably Kelly, Cameron, Julia, and Andrew—view themselves as learners in an on-going way and use their respective positions to train and educate others in their schools.

Allies who are less aware of their straight privilege opted not to share their “bad” stories of allyship. Difficult, more challenging, so-called bad stories, discussed in Chapter 4, cause a great deal of discomfort and shame on the part of allies. Found among those who more readily acknowledge their straight privilege, bad stories are presented as a moment in time to learn from. What is taken from these challenging experiences goes to the heart of the debate about whether allies belong in social movements at all. That is, we are only as effective as our ability to recognize and mitigate our own privilege.

A significant element of this research is the way that these educators have come to understand themselves as allies, discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Many participants in this study came to their ally identity because of their relationship to students and/or a desire to ensure greater safety for queer students at school. In other words, students from marginalized groups have identified the participants as, at the very least, caring adults who are invested in their well-being. So, while the participants’ path through allyship is certainly not linear and is fraught with tensions, something about the way they conduct themselves in their professional lives has communicated that they are open to or are engaged in the process of allyship.

Other participants came to identify as an ally because of a desire to do more or be better at supporting students whose life experiences they, admittedly, do not understand. In Chapters 4 and 5, I

examined in greater depth allies' motivations for doing this equity work. None of the questions I asked specifically focused on trans students, but many participants identified effectively supporting trans students as a limit or barrier to allyship in their school. In other words, although trans students continue to experience marginalization, those who actively seek out opportunities to advocate do not feel equipped with the tools to support them. They are eager to acquire those tools, but as Huelskamp (2014) identifies, some of the allies find themselves at a loss because they lack a blueprint. Participants' experiences of stumbling into and through advocacy work for trans youth bring to the fore the limited amount of support and training for educators as they work to ensure safe and just spaces for trans youth (Chapters 5 and 6).

Participants who seemed most ready to acknowledge their privilege as straight allies also adapted their school-based activities and allyship most adeptly.

Limitations of the Research

A limit of this research is the relative homogeneity of the straight allies. In addition to being straight, they are with one exception, white. Many of the participants live in urban settings (although the size may differ) few live in rural areas. As a result, there is a narrower focus in the narratives than there would be if participants were straight and also experienced oppression in other areas of their life. In other words, many of the participants, like me, experience privilege in many areas of their life and social location.

Another limitation is the requirement that participants self-identify as allies. In other words, I did not use other criteria to screen candidates. In conceiving this research, I did not want to eliminate potential participants if they were not GSA leaders in their schools. Sometimes an ally will be a leader of the GSA, and other times they will not be. This often depends, in my experience, on the school culture and relationships amongst colleagues. For example, a GSA leader may be open and welcoming

to other staff, encouraging them to join in, but they also may not be. Because there were no such criteria for participation in my research, there was great diversity of ally experience and involvement amongst the participants. Despite these limitations, this research sheds some light on the complex experiences of allies in Ontario schools. It also goes beyond the notion that one-off instances of anti-homophobia will make schools safer in and of themselves. In the absence of other supports, one-off days will be just that: one time only affairs. Emerging from the experiences and stories of the straight allies in this research, I offer a series suggestions for providing more support for straight allies that will ultimately benefit the youth for whom they advocate.

Recommendations

Recommendations from this study for educators, school board officials, and administrators include:

- 1) **Improve Training:** School boards and Faculties of Education should support (in some cases, continue to support) training for teachers/pre-service teachers on LGBTQ+ issues. As this research has shown, there is very little (sometimes no) training for ally teachers. Most often the role is assumed by a person wanting to do some good, but they may have no background in social justice. This, in combination with a deficiency of staff training, means their methods often lack a guiding ideology or tool kit to approach leading a GSA. They are also often without processes for approaching conflict and challenges. Their ability to implement thoughtful programming is frequently left up to them. One of the challenges with training is that it often occurs amongst groups of like-minded people who are already “on-board” with anti-homophobia, queering work, and/or challenging heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools. Training should be mandatory for all staff working in publicly-funded school settings. Additional Qualification courses for teachers and mandatory courses for pre-service teachers that focus on allyship and straight privilege should be offered in teacher education programs in Education

faculties. The Principal Qualification Program (PQP) courses should also include curriculum to develop the awareness of newly-trained and qualified Principals in terms of LGBTQ+ allyship. This training will foster the leadership skills of Principals and provide them with the tools to lead more equitable school environments. While making strong connections to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, this training should focus on highlighting straight and cisgender privilege. Teachers have a legal responsibility to respect their students' human rights (in publicly-funded schools), and so educators must fulfill that responsibility. Critics of this assertion may claim that such a goal is too lofty and that eradicating homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity is impossible. Rather, I suggest that these forms of oppression should be challenged more directly in schools. In the same way that school administrators implicitly expect appropriate and respectful treatment of other marginalized student groups (for example, students with diverse learning needs), respecting gender and sexual diversity should become an expectation that all staff members in a school community meet with appropriate training to make it possible. I encourage school boards to train staff to integrate LGBTQ+ content into all forms of curriculum so that it is not treated as an extra-curricular commitment, but instead as a part of daily life in schools. In saying this, I do not expect (nor is it appropriate for) all staff to become allies. I do, however, think it is reasonable to expect educators employed in a publicly-funded system to make a concerted effort to resist homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and transphobia.

- 2) **Focus on whole-school approaches:** Upholding human rights in publicly-funded schools is the professional responsibility of all educators. It is not like coaching the basketball team, where one or two teachers take responsibility and fulfill the commitment for the rest of the staff. It is a professional obligation of educators and should be supported by policy. This is also a safeguard against the movement of teachers from one school to another. In the event a teacher ally is

transferred from one school to another, a holistic approach ensures that LGBTQ+ students in the school continue to feel supported and valued.

- 3) **Cultivate and highlight ally leadership:** Teacher leadership should assume a stance of educating peers and clearing the way for youth to undertake the projects that they value. It is noteworthy that allies can be leaders for their colleagues. As I identify above, support and training for allies as leaders in their schools should be provided and/or enhanced in schools where some training already exists.
- 4) **Make fewer assumptions:** Straight educators should not assume they understand the experiences of marginalized youth/colleagues. They should speak less and listen more. Straight educators need to listen to oppressed youth/colleagues to help make their experiences safer. I encourage allies to consume scholarship (Killoran & Jimenez, 2007), books, film, blogs, and other media written and created by LGBTQ+ people. Self-education is an important component of developing one's skills as an ally.
- 5) **Challenge and contest privilege:** Recognizing and rooting out straight privilege is the first step toward being an ally. Those that understand their own privilege as straight (white, cisgender, settler) people can challenge themselves and others to support students and colleagues.

Concluding Thoughts

This research contributes to conversations about homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity in Ontario schools. It uncovers and explores the experiences of the people most often at the helm of Gay/Straight Alliances and other LGBTQ+ groups in schools—straight teachers. I offer this research to those scholars and activists who are wrestling with the notion of allyship and grappling with the challenges related to privileged persons advocating for marginalized ones. Including a study of their intentions, concerns, successes, and failures, this dissertation and research provides insight into the

experiences of straight teacher allies. I suggest to administration and school board officials that policy implementation which supports and is developed by LGBTQ+ youth should be a top-priority.

Participants in this study often assumed responsibility for implementing safer school policies with little guidance or training. Whenever possible, LGBTQ+ staff and students' opinions and ideas should direct these changes.

I realize that the data and analysis presented in this study represent a kernel of what exists to be learned about privilege, school-based oppression, and allyship. However, it could have implications for other provinces/jurisdictions that have on-going LGBTQ+ equity initiatives frequently led by straight people, and there are many ways in which it could be built upon. One study that could emerge from this research is a similarly designed research initiative that focuses on straight teacher allies in other jurisdictions in Canada. I would like to undertake a similar study of Nova Scotia schools, now that this is where I live. Yet another extension could focus on a comparison of the experiences of straight teacher allies and queer teachers leading GSAs. Another could involve researching students alongside their straight or queer teacher leaders.

This research topic originated in a humbling experience of enacting straight privilege, what I call *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*. Following that incident, I set out to understand the complex, multi-layered experiences of straight teacher allies in schools. In response to data gathered from the participants in this research, I suggest that allies in schools need to do more than host one-off anti-homophobia initiatives in their schools. Some of the participants also articulate this belief. While events and activities like Day of Pink play an important role in schools, they should be a starting point for school-based equity measures. Schools and school boards should also be wary of the assumption that the existence of a GSA makes a school substantially safer for LGBTQ+ staff and students. In some cases, a GSA may enhance LGBTQ+ safety, but in others instances it may not. Participants in this research

discussed the importance of the GSAs or other initiatives in their schools, but also indicated their limitations, sometimes pondering their efficacy.

Some readers may interpret this argument about the limitations of anti-homophobia as cynical and discouraging. That is not what I intend. Instead, I want to challenge teacher allies to go further, dig deeper, and reflect critically about their own position in relation to LGBTQ+ issues. In many cases, participants in this study want to do more, but are limited by a paucity (perceived or otherwise) of resources and institutional support. I think that teacher allies, like the ones in this study, have good intentions and, in some cases, good instincts about how to support their students. Nevertheless, many have little training or background in these areas. I present this research as a record of the work that is being done in schools while also applying a critical nudge to allies, including myself. Reflecting on my own experiences and analyzing the data based on the experiences of others helps me to see the need for teacher allies to challenge themselves to reflect on their own privilege, to call for stronger institutional leadership, and to insist on more coherent policies to support queer students. Challenging the status quo in the form of anti-homophobia education and activism is a positive step, but teacher allies should work toward. I hope that this research can be useful for teacher allies as fodder to reflect on their own current practices so that they can become more comfortable with their bad stories of allyship. I maintain my belief that there is still a place in social movements for allies, but allies themselves need to do a better job of identifying and challenging their own privilege to contribute respectfully and productively.

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Appendix A: Letter of Information



Faculty of Education
Graduate Studies
t: (807) 621-6375
e: lcpotvin@lakeheadu.ca

Dear _____,

My name is Leigh Potvin and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Joint PhD in Educational Studies at Lakehead University. My supervisor is Dr. Gerald Walton, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education.

My doctoral research focuses on the experiences of straight teacher allies working in Gay/Straight Alliances or other sexual/gender identity advocacy in K – 12 schools. First, I would like to ask you to watch a short video and answer some questions in an interactive environment with other participants. Second, I am interested in asking you some follow-up questions within 4 to 6 weeks after the group session concludes.

If you choose to participate, you can complete the questions online, at your convenience and return to it as you see fit over the course of the research. The one-on-one interview will take no longer than one hour either in person or via Skype. The interview will be video-recorded and will take place after school hours and off school property. The recording will be stored on a secure hard drive, kept by Dr. Gerald Walton and will be destroyed after 5 years. The Google doc will be saved on a cloud service and will be anonymized. To ensure your anonymity and confidentiality, I will not use your real name, only a pseudonym of your choosing or, if you prefer, one that I will choose for you. I will not include any identifying information in the dissertation whereby your identity could be deduced. The data I collect from the interview could be used in academic settings such as presentations and/or publication in academic journals/books, in which case, your anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained.

In agreeing to participate, you can choose not to answer any question and/or complete an activity during the group session. I will not add to your discomfort by asking “Why not?” or any other response or question that attempts to interrogate your reason for not offering an answer and/or for choosing not to participate. I will simply move to the next question and/or afford you the space to not participate. You can also choose not to participate in any part of the research process, including the interview, and/or stop the interview at any time without pressure from me to continue.

By participating, you are helping me to understand this area of research better by providing me with your insights and perspectives. Thank you for your generosity of time and spirit. A copy of my dissertation can be sent to you upon your request and will be sent to you in the writing phase for your feedback.

In the unlikely event that the interview causes you to become anxious or distraught, I cannot counsel you, but I can refer you to Crisis Response Services in Thunder Bay and area (807 346 8282 or 1888 269 3100) or an equivalent organization in your city/region.

Should you wish to contact my supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton, he can be reach through email at gwalton@lakeheadu.ca or by telephone at 807 343 8051. This project has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at 807 343 8283 or research@lakeheadu.ca.

Sincerely,

Leigh Potvin

Appendix B: Consent Form



Faculty of Education
 Graduate Studies
 t: (807) 621-6375
 e: lpotvin@lakeheadu.ca

More than Pink Shirts and Posters: Straight Ally Educators in Schools

I have read the accompanying explanation of the research project. My signature below indicates that I understand the following ethical considerations.

- My participation is voluntary and no evaluative judgments will be made about me if I decline to participate.
- I have the right to withdraw at any time.
- Involvement in this research project will not pose any risks to me.
- My identity will be protected (anonymity) in any publications through use of pseudonyms.
- The data will be stored securely by the researchers for five years in a locked storage space. All electronic or multimedia data will be downloaded and stored on a secured hard-drive (not connected to the Internet), again in a locked, secure room. After a 5-year period, all multimedia data (electronic, notes, or tape) will be destroyed.
- The findings and analysis of this project will be made available to me at my request upon the completion of the project.
- I realize that details and issues of respectful research or ethical conduct can be discussed at any time with Dr. Gerald Walton, Research Supervisor (Gerald.Walton@lakeheadu.ca), Leigh Potvin, Doctoral Candidate (lpotvin@lakeheadu.ca or 807-621-6375) or Sue Wright, at the Office of Research Services (807-343-8283).

I have read this form and the accompanying letter and I agree to participate in the study, *More than Pink Shirts and Posters: Straight Ally Educators in Schools*.

☐ I permit, Leigh Potvin (Doctoral Candidate), to record collaborative learning sessions with other participants as well as a one-on-one interview via skype, telephone, or in-person.

Name (please print):

Signature of Teacher Participant

Email Contact

Date

Telephone Number: _____ (work) or _____ (Alt.)

Appendix C: Video Link and Supporting Instructions

Video link: https://youtu.be/7ApJN_hyZ50

Steps to answering the research questions and using the link:

- 1) Log out of any google services you have (GMail, Drive, Docs, ALL OF THEM)
- 2) Go to this link: (link provided to participants)
- 3) You should see an icon like the ones below in the top right corner of your browser window:



These icons would normally be your face/identity, but because we want to remain anonymous and if you've signed out, google will represent you as a little animal. If you see other animals pop up, that means other people are contributing at the same time.

- 4) Type in your responses to the 4 questions. The questions posed are (1) Please share your successful ally moments; (2) Share your less-than-successful or troubling moments as an ally; (3) What are the limitations of the anti-homophobia initiatives in your school or board? (4) Have I missed something? Is there anything else you want to comment on?
- 5) You're done this step. Email Leigh to set up an interview time, if you don't, I will follow up 7 days after sending you the link.

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Proposed Interview Questions

1. What do you think was the most important thing you learned in creating the framework/collaborating with others?
2. If you could “do it all over again” (the collaborative phase) are there things you would do differently? Why?
 - a. If yes, are these changes rooted in your role/stance as a participant or part of the process?
3. Did creating the framework challenge your ideas about running a GSA/doing LGBTQ+ equity work in your school?
4. Has your thinking about anti-homophobia work shifted because of developing the framework?
 - a. Do you think you’ll use the framework in your practice?
5. Since returning to your school do you think you “see” straight privilege more?
6. If you had to describe your participation in this research to a trusted colleague or friend, what would you say?
 - a. If you had to describe your participation in this research to administration/senior admin in your school and/or school district, what would you say?
7. What do you think about focusing on what we called “bad” stories of ally activism in the collaborative sessions? Were you able to share one?
8. Do you think your conception of allyship (being an ally) has changed since the group session?
9. When I started doing ally activism work in schools, I thought that I was being a “good person” just for showing up to be an ally. My mindset has shifted away from this in recent years. Does any of that resonate with you? Can you explain?
10. Do you remember the story I told in the group session about *The Great Twitter Debacle* (as I like to call it)? Do you have any stories like that? How do stories or experiences like that make you feel as an ally?

Finalized Questions:

1. Why was participating in this research important to you? In other words, why did you make time (amongst all the other things you have to do) to participate?
2. What does being an ally mean to you? Has that changed over time?
3. How did you come to do ally work?
4. What is the most important issue for allies to be aware of in school?
5. What barriers do you think exist for allies in your school/school board?
6. Have you ever been asked to consider straight privilege? What does that mean to you?
7. Is there anything else that I’ve missed that you want to talk about now?

Appendix E: Coding Samples

Dissertation - Code Group Manager		
<div> <div>+</div> <div>🗑️</div> <div>Grouped by Nothing ▾</div> </div>		
	Name ^	Comment
<input type="checkbox"/>	Allyship	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Anti-oppressive education	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Classroom/curriculum initiatives	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Experiences of Oppression	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Limitations/challenges to allyship	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Methodology	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Participant profiles	
<input type="checkbox"/>	School board/Administration	
<input type="checkbox"/>	School initiatives	
<input type="checkbox"/>	School Population	
Result: 10 of 10 Group(s)		

Code Groups

Allyship (12)					
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	allyship	17	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_ally definitions	15	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_anti-homophobia	14	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_bad story	23	1	1	self explanatory. so-called bad
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_barriers to activism	9	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_ethic of care/caring	10	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_good story	8	0	1	successes as an ally
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_great twitter debacle	1	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_leadership	26	0	1	perspectives on leadership (w/
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_notions of progress	9	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_response to homophobia	22	0	1	
<input type="radio"/>	allyship_taking risks	1	0	1	
Result: 12 of 100 Code(s)					

Codes

Dissertation - Code Group Manager

Grouped by Nothing

Search

Name	Comment
Allyship	
Anti-oppressive education	
Classroom/curriculum initiatives	
Experiences of Oppression	
Limitations/challenges to allyship	
Methodology	
Participant profiles	
School board/Administration	
School initiatives	
School Population	

Result: 10 of 10 Group(s)

Code Group: Allyship

Comment: No Comment

Status: Created: July 18, 2016 Leigh
Changed: July 18, 2016 Leigh

In Group:	Not In Group:
allyship 17	advocacy/political 5
allyship_ally definitions 15	anti-authority 1
allyship_anti-homophobia 14	Anti-oppressive education 4
allyship_bad story 23	anti-oppressive_equality 1
allyship_barriers to activism 9	anti-oppressive_feminist 2
allyship_ethic of care/caring 10	anti-oppressive_human rights 8
allyship_good story 8	anti-oppressive_intersectionality 17
allyship_great twitter debacle 1	anti-oppressive_privilege 71
allyship_leadership 26	anti-oppressive_social justice 13

Code groups

Classroom/curriculum initiatives (5)					
		Classroom/Curriculum initiative_curricu...	10	0	1
		classroom/curriculum initiative_healthy...	5	0	1
		Classroom/curriculum initiatives	2	0	1
		classroom/curriculum initiatives_teachi...	3	0	1
		classroom/curriculum initiatives_HPE c...	12	0	1
Result: 5 of 100 Code(s)					

New curriculum rolled out by t

Codes